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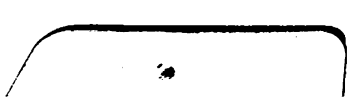

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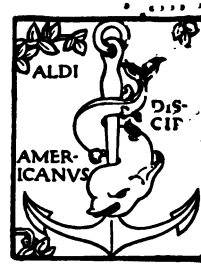
Viele

MYRA OF THE PINES

BY

HERMAN KNICKERBOCKER VIELÉ

Author of "The Inn of the Silver Moon" and "The Last of the Knickerbockers"



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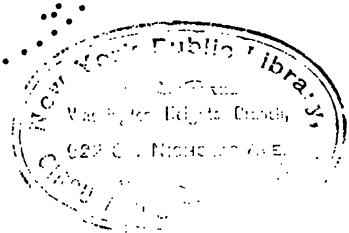


TO MY FRIEND

Brander Matthews

21415

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER I

TO THEBES 8 MILES ☛

THIS bit of information, lettered in red lead upon the blazed trunk of a pine-tree, might have applied to any one of four diverging sandy tracks. But then, nobody ever passed the cross-roads who did not know the way to Thebes.

"Some day," remarked Miss Myra Dale, "I shall paint over that inscription. It is ridiculous to live nowhere but 'Eight miles from Thebes.'"

"I hope you will do nothing of the sort without consulting Mr. Ramsey," replied her mother.

The ladies, standing before the tree, appeared to regard its legend with a more than casual interest, but it was noticeable that each from time to time allowed her eyes to stray toward the level, shadowy vista to the west—toward Thebes in point of fact.

"If Mr. Ramsey should happen to be here to-day—if that should be his buggy coming now"—began Mrs. Dale, misled by tricks of changing light among the pines into betrayal of her watch.

"Oh, he will come to-day," her daughter interposed with confident indifference; "he was to bring that Colonel Somebody to inspect the property, you know."

"Yes, Colonel Blunt, the treasurer of the company; but whenever the Colonel writes that he will come he telegraphs to say that he has been detained." And, with a little sigh of resignation, the elder lady resolutely turned her back to Thebes.

"Perhaps he has a premonition what it will be like," suggested Myra, flippantly, stooping as she spoke to pick a last year's pine-cone from the fragrant ground.

Mrs. Dale followed her daughter's trifling act with interest. Perceiving the find to have been commonplace, she remarked, in accents of reproof: "Myra, you should not speak slightingly of the property, even in jest. Think of this sky and air!" But these not being assets in which a treasurer might find satisfaction, she concluded some-

what lamely: "And I am sure that when the trees are all cut down the land will be very nice."

"I wonder what the Colonel will think of us?" Myra speculated, springing lightly from a subject on which the ladies secretly agreed. "I wonder if he will approve of Mr. Ramsey's choice of tenants?"

"And, pray, why should he not?" demanded Mrs. Dale, with dignity.

"Of course," went on her daughter, "he will not know we were the only *white* family in the State willing to live eight miles from nowhere in particular, and he may be critical; he may expect to find us just a shade more strenuous than we are, perhaps."

"No one of any refinement could fail to appreciate your father," Mrs. Dale replied, as though this were an argument.

"Or you, too, mother, let us hope," added Myra, dutifully, "or even me. And Colonel Blunt need never guess that under any circumstances the temptation of a log-house in the wilderness would have proved irresistible to us, quite apart from the satisfaction of thwarting Providence."

"To my mind we were guided here," declared her mother, piously.

"Oh, no!" protested Myra, undismayed; "our obvious destination was the poorhouse, and I am not at all sure it might not have been the best. Father would have invented a reversible coffin for paupers worth a fortune in itself, and you, mother, might have stamped yourself upon the age. Think of the copy for the *Inglenook* right at hand—'Poorhouse Papers,' 'Letters from a Lazaretto,' 'Chats with the Criminal Insane.' Oh, it was a sacrifice, our coming here. Even I might have caused ill-feeling between the junior warden—if there is such a person—and the assistant visiting physician—if they have one; now I shall never have another chance to be thoroughly interesting."

"Myra," said Mrs. Dale, becoming thoughtful, "of course what you say is absolutely idiotic, but I wonder we never thought before of the poorhouse as a scheme of local colour."

"Mother," rejoined Myra, gravely, "if you should study local colour in the poorhouse the result would be an intrigue of court life in the time of Charles the Second. When our surroundings

are the shabbiest, your characters are always most refined."

"And slummy things are always in demand," reflected Mrs. Dale, pursuant of her former train of thought. "Let us sit down here and talk it over."

The roadside bank was smooth and clean, and springy with a mat of dead brown needles fallen from above; the low, sweet droning of the autumn wind among the pines a stimulant to fancy. About the cross-roads the forest stretched a county's breadth on every side, its trees all young and lusty, and of equal size—an aftermath without history or tradition, but not without possibilities of its own. Here one was free to imagine anything that had ever been in any forest; and better, other things that do not belong in forests.

"Listen! I am sure something is coming," cautioned Mrs. Dale.

Myra shook her head.

"If you listen in the woods, mother," she replied, "you will always hear something coming. I hear it every day and every night, always nearer and nearer, but never here. Sometimes it is like

the paddles of the Sound steamers that used to pass the end of our old street in Astoria; sometimes a train of Pullman cars upon a bridge, and sometimes only a funeral jolting over the cobble-stones from the Ninety-second Street Ferry."

"No, not like that," the other cried in protest. "Let us hear nothing but pleasant things."

"I don't care much what they are, if they would only come," said Myra, recklessly. In all the silent autumn day nothing could really happen in the pinelands, so it was safe to throw a challenge down to chance. And other days would be the same—the patient shadows and the patient sun, and in the trees a ceaseless mimicry of life and death. Nothing would ever come—except Mr. Ramsey in his buggy.

"Wait till your father sells one of his inventions," admonished Mrs. Dale, as one recalls the cheerful fiction of the expected ship. She spoke impersonally, shifting her position to avoid a sunbeam more persistent than the rest. And Myra only laughed a little, also impersonally.

The world was beautiful, and in the pinelands barter and bargain, and the chatter of the market-

place seemed far away. It was like being on a desert island under the special providence reserved for castaways, like inhabiting a new unsullied planet, where monetary systems are unknown. Through a brief silence they could hear the lazy purring of the woods, the dropping of dry twigs —now here, now there—the business of small unseen creatures in the fallen needles.

Myra, with her back against a tree, dissected her pine-cone with idle curiosity, threw away the fragments, and, having rubbed her small browned resiny hands together, looked about for another. Her mother sat erect, her keen black eyes alert to seek the cause of every woodland sound. Even in their mode of doing nothing mother and daughter were unlike, a fortunate circumstance, perhaps, for two thrown much together. Mrs. Dale—"Aunt Emmet" to the readers of the *Inglenook*—was small and slight, and wore her white hair drawn high upon her head to add a cubit to her stature. There was no reason why at forty her hair should have been white; but so it was, and, in contrast with her youthful face, bright eyes, and black, straight eyebrows, it gave an odd, preposterous suggestion of

masquerade. It had been her ambition once to weigh one hundred pounds, but this, with several others, had been given up, and Mrs. Dale, resigned to littleness—a comprehensive littleness—cut her infrequent dresses short, bestowed a nice attention on her feet, and, in adornment, ran to ruffles. A Dresden shepherdess in mourning, Myra had pronounced her when the present dress was new. But not for months had anything pertaining to the family been new, except financial difficulties, and even these do not retain their crispness long.

Myra, unlike her mother, was not an alien in the forest, no more so than the sunlight or the autumn wind. One would have accepted her as part of it, unquestioningly at first, almost unconsciously, waiting till later—a very little later—to apprehend her true significance in the picture; to realise how well the greens and umbers of the pines united for her background; how cleverly accessories led up to her; how happily the blue colour of her cotton dress had faded to the tone best suited to her hair.

Had this blue fabric been a trifle less abominably shabby; had the wind and sweeping pine-boughs exercised restraint in their antics with her hair;

had she herself, in fact, been another than Miss Myra Dale, she must have been pronounced at once an exceptionally pretty girl. As it was, it took an appreciable moment to discover this most vital fact —the moment of suspense that makes after-certainty so much more sure.

Myra was tall—beside her mother very tall—and for this reason wore her hair so low across her forehead that, when within some measure of control, it nearly touched two perfect curves of darker bronze. Myra's eyes—it was from them the flash of revelation came—held every shade of brown at once. One seeing them might think of jade and jasper melting, but not mingling, in tawny port, with just an added drop of topaz dissolving in Tokay; but then, should the explorer think of anything beyond the eyes themselves, it must be of a nose, too short and straight for classification—for anything but worship—or of a mouth and chin, where even ardour of discovery must have stopped contented.

When Mr. Ramsey, resident agent of the Pineopolis Improvement and Colonisation Company (Limited), first met Miss Dale in Thebes six months before this narrative begins, he had considered her

untidy. But, holding the opinion still, he had come since then to think untidiness a merit.

The cackling of a hen from somewhere near at hand arousing the ladies from their reveries, moved them to exchange a look of quick intelligence. And, being roused, both turned toward the vista of the road.

"He is coming," said Miss Dale. "He will be here in just eight minutes."

"Oh, Myra! if Colonel Blunt should for once *not* be detained," began her mother, with sudden apprehension, which note her daughter interpreted aright.

"I know my hair is far from neat," admitted Myra, readily, "but there is time enough for an elaborate toilet. And that is not the worst of me."

She put in evidence a small foot shod in a cheap low shoe, lifting the hem of her faded dress just high enough to disclose the worst beyond a doubt.

"Dear me, where are they, child?" her mother cried, in real dismay.

"Oh, only drying on the kitchen roof, secured from accident by father's inkstand and a brick."

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Dale again. "What would Mr. Ramsey think?"

"Unless you mention the matter, I assure you he shall have no occasion to think of it at all," rejoined Myra, with composure. "I wonder what he will bring to-day as a contribution to our dinner—'in case the butcher has forgotten to call,' his tactful way of putting it."

"Mr. Ramsey has a great deal of tact," her mother interposed. "He knows how far we are from supplies; and then he passes this way so often going to the cranberry bog."

"Which is much nearer by the other road," said Myra. "It is most thoughtful of him, I am sure, but I, for my part, should rather be under obligations to the county. It would be so much more impersonal were the cost of our beefsteak apportioned among the townships."

"Mr. Ramsey has been a true friend to us," said Mrs. Dale, reprovingly, "and he is always most considerate. Why, the last time he was here he shared our dinner without hesitation. I remember perfectly; we had liver and bacon. If you are so sensitive, Myra, you might easily offset these tri-

fling obligations by making him some simple piece of fancy-work."

"Yes, indeed," assented Myra, with suspicious readiness. "A tobacco-pouch; but then he does not smoke. Perhaps a book-mark would be better, with an appropriate motto: 'Love the Giver, who Guv the Liver!'"

Myra did not wait for comment on her motto —even constitutional amiability has at times a limit—but, springing to her feet, ran lightly in the direction of a small new house, half hidden in the trees. Once she turned and called back to her mother, following more slowly:

"If I should not get back in time, the steak will be under the seat beside the halter. Look carefully. There may be butter."

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER TWO

"Myra," said Mrs. Dale, unmoved by this approval, "please drive off Brigham Young; he will not let his wives eat anything at all."

Brigham, a large bird, blue of body, appeared to have put on, through inadvertence, the head of a smaller yellow fowl, and his driving off was not accomplished without confusion.

"Myra," said Mrs. Dale, severely, when again decorum reigned, "I thought you intended to make yourself presentable."

"Oh, not for Colonel Blunt," replied her child. "If one is to be snubbed and patronised, one must have some better garments in reserve to save one's self-respect. But, really, I have fixed my hair."

"Have you?" inquired her mother, with the frankness of near relationship. "I never should have guessed it. Here they come! Do occupy yourself with something!"

"Lend me the scissors," whispered Myra.

She took the implement, delving for it in the work-bag, and began with reckless industry to snip the leaves of a geranium plant, trimming one into the semblance of a heart, another into that of a star. And, absorbed in her pursuit, she did not

turn when, a moment later, the sound of creaking springs and crunching twigs brought terror to the chickens. Nor did she seem to hear the voice which presently cried out in hearty greeting: "Good morning, Mrs. Dale! Everything lovely in Pineopolis; everybody well?"

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Ramsey. And you are well, I trust?" the chatelaine returned so graciously that even Colonel Blunt must have been favourably impressed.

"I'm feeling fit to kill," went on the hearty speaker, still more heartily. "How's the Professor? Whoa, there; dern your picture! Who are you trying to kick?"

Assuming these remarks intended for her mother but in part, Myra bent to mutilate another leaf. In fancy she could see familiar antics on the part of a pale brown horse, but these she steadfastly refused to see in fact.

"Do take some notice of Mr. Ramsey," admonished Mrs. Dale, in an impatient undertone. "He is looking straight at you." Whereupon Myra took some notice of Mr. Ramsey, standing at his horse's head, by acknowledging the open gratifica-

tion on his sunburned face with a none too gracious nod.

"Good morning, Mr. Ramsey," she said, stiffly, and resumed her occupation.

Mr. Ramsey, who was short and wiry, gave at once the impression of one who is much in the open air. His skin was of a wholesome ruddiness, deepening to red about the neck and toward the end of his aggressive nose, and, touched by the same potent influence, his blond moustache and whiskers were lighter by several shades than nature had originally planned. It was improbable that his eyes, in colour gray, should have likewise faded, but such was the suggestion they conveyed.

To eyes less critical Mr. Ramsey might have appeared an active, capable young man, of less than thirty, serious for his years, and not ill-favoured; but Myra's, following the manœuvres of the pale horse, expressed but disapproval of the agent of Pineopolis. Perhaps she would have been better pleased had it occurred to Mr. Ramsey to raise his hat; that much might be expected even from one the last of his generation to cultivate side whiskers.

For the second visitor, still seated in the vehicle,

the treasurer, she had only a calm, unalterable resentment. Presently she should bear her share of well-fed patronage; but whatever the attitude of others, Myra would spare few words for Colonel Blunt, unless the opportunity occurred to give her own impressions of his property.

Meanwhile the objectionable Blunt stepped down, with a deliberation born, of course, of a regard for clothes ill-suited to his expedition. On the ground he seemed much taller and less old than she had pictured him, and more erect than other colonels she had known. But the overbearing, purse-proud nature of the man betrayed itself at once.

When, on looking to Mr. Ramsey for an introduction, he perceived that gentleman to have disappeared behind the horse, the circumstance disturbed him not the least. Drawing his heels together he removed a soft felt hat, and made obeisance in a manner, to Myra's mind, insufferably affected, though Mrs. Dale came near to courtesying. One detail of behaviour alone was in his favour—he did not begin at once to note defects.

"It is indeed a pleasure to welcome you to Pine-

opolis, Colonel Blunt," began the hostess, with the charming frankness of one of her own heroines; but the stranger thereupon held back with some embarrassment.

"Oh, say, I beg your pardon!" came the voice of Mr. Ramsey from across the crupper, "I'm forgetting manners. Mrs. Dale, let me make you acquainted with Mr. Christensen, of Sweden. The Colonel didn't come."

"Ah!" cried Mrs. Dale, with real delight, for the unexpected never took her by surprise. "From Sweden! How delightful!" Had it been from Lapland her tone could not have expressed more pleasure.

"So!" said the stranger, at his ease at once. "I am no longer now of Sweden, but of New York," he added, conscientiously. "And I am charmed to meet you, Mrs. Dale, and Miss Dale, also, if I am right."

Miss Dale inclined her head, and did not raise it again directly; a silhouette of the brown horse was still unfinished.

"How do you do?" she murmured, endeavouring hastily to revise her plan of conduct to suit a per-

son against whom, being neither treasurer nor colonel, she had no just grievance. One look into the stranger's face had shown her that his eyes were blue and amiable, and not at all the eyes of one disposed to patronage.

She heard him speaking to her mother, who, in answering, employed her broadest "a"—with her a compliment—but she did not hear what either said. Presently, when only the stem of the geranium leaf remained unsnipped, she realised that they were coming nearer, and suspected Mrs. Dale of an intent to meanly slip away to seek enlightenment from Mr. Ramsey, leaving the burden of hospitality upon her child.

"Myra," said Mrs. Dale, in honeyed tones, "Mr. Christensen has been telling me that they have houses in Sweden built of logs like ours."

"Have they?" said Myra, without undue elation.

"Yes," replied the Swede; "but then our roofs are made much steeper on account of the snow."

"Of course that must be necessary," assented Myra, most unwillingly, for she detested facts.

"I don't believe your father heard the carriage,"

murmured Mrs. Dale, with truth, though that was not her real reason for pursuit of Mr. Ramsey, after a playful and apologetic nod.

"I see that you are fond of flowers," Mr. Christensen remarked when she had gone, and Myra coloured guiltily.

"Are the Swedish peasants fond of flowers?" she inquired.

"Oh, very," he assured her. "They have a saying in my country that 'A flower will turn a lock that a brass key cannot move.' I am afraid I do not express it very well in English."

"That is a very pretty proverb," she replied. "I shall remember it."

Mr. Christensen's blue eyes expressed gratification. So far they had been directed toward the tree-tops chiefly. Now, as he lowered them to hers, she grew conscious that he, too, revised some first impressions.

"Have you ever been in the pines before?" she asked him, hurriedly, anxious only to avert a pause.

"Never till to-day," he answered. "You are fortunate to live among them. I should fancy every hour here would be too short."

"That is because you do not have to stay here," she rejoined, with sudden shyness. Whoever this unexplained visitor from Sweden might be, he had a way of watching the effect of his remarks as though he did not trust the words themselves implicitly.

"I suppose you have many visitors who come to see the property?" he suggested.

"No; not a soul so far," she answered, honestly, and, remembering the interests of the company, added: "But then we have not been here long—not quite a month."

"So!" said Mr. Christensen. "Then I shall be the first to intrude."

Myra threw away the leaf and wiped the scissors on her sleeve.

"You would not call it intruding if you knew us better," she answered, looking up. "Mother and I often regret that there are no Indians in the woods to come and sit around and grunt and ask for fire-water."

"You make your hospitality so broad that even I shall feel at ease," replied the other, gravely. By moving a step Myra could see her mother near the

wood-pile in confidential converse with the agent, and surmised that now she must know all that might be learnt concerning Mr. Christensen.

"Let us walk as far as the stump, and see what time it is," suggested Myra, moving out into the sunlight.

An elementary sun-dial rested on the stump, consisting of a disk of tin whereon were certain radial scratches, and a long nail upright to supply the necessary moving shadow.

"It is nearly twelve," announced Myra. "Have you ever before seen a day divided on a pie-plate?"

"No," answered Mr. Christensen; "that would be possible only here."

"This is a contrivance of my father's," Myra explained, with a touch of pride. "He is an inventor, you know."

"So!" said Mr. Christensen, appreciatively.

"Yes," she went on, "he has invented some really wonderful things—an automatic dish-washer, which he calls the 'Sarah,' after mother, and a portable circus-seat, and an infant incubator, and lots of others."

"And are none of them named after you?" inquired Mr. Christensen.

"Yes," she admitted, flushing a little, "there is the 'Myra' bottle-stopper. He gave it my name because I insist that it is the best of all. It is simple and at the same time clever."

"So!" said Mr. Christensen, and he repeated the name "the Myra. I look forward to meeting Professor Dale," he added. "This Mr. Ramsey has told me of his great abilities."

"That was nice of Mr. Ramsey," rejoined Myra, wondering why "this" before a person's name should make that name appear less desirable.

Meanwhile Mr. Ramsey, having made a disposition of the pale horse that was mutually satisfactory, drew near, and with him came the hostess, alert and smiling, as was her wont.

"And so the Professor has made a new discovery," he was saying, with the heartiness of old acquaintance. "What is it this time?"

"Oh, a most wonderful mineral spring," replied Mrs. Dale. "But he will tell you all about it himself. It is full of iron and oxygen and all sorts of things."

"That's great!" the agent cried, effusively. "We'll have Pineopolis a health resort before we know it! Good day again, Miss Myra."

"Good morning, Mr. Ramsey."

Mr. Ramsey would have shaken hands had not Myra at the moment dropped her scissors, which remained upright in the sand by chance.

Though both gentlemen sprang to pick it up, Mr. Christensen had the advantage of being nearest.

"There is a superstition in Sweden," he observed, as he restored her property, "that when a scissors stands like that its owner is about to make a very good friend."

"There must be lots of sand in Sweden to make that a proverb," commented Mr. Ramsey, carpingly.

"Oh, yes; there is a great deal of sand," replied the Swede.

Mrs. Dale now moved toward the house. The graceful gesture of her small hand and its accompanying comprehensive smile would have encouraged a much more reluctant company to follow. Beside her moved the guest of honour; behind, her daughter and the agent, in the order given.

"Wait a moment," whispered Myra, holding back as the leaders disappeared across the threshold, and Mr. Ramsey waited willingly.

"Who is this Mr. Christensen?" she asked.

"Oh, just a party from New York," explained the other, in a hoarse and confidential undertone. "I never laid eyes on him myself till he turned up in Thebes with a letter from old man Blunt. He's looking for land for Swedish emigrants."

"And does he think of forming a nucleus himself?" she asked.

"Oh, no; he wouldn't come himself," replied the agent, with a cautious glance toward the door. "As near as I can make out, it is some sort of charitable scheme. He tells me he is in the banking business. A kind of outside fellow, like enough. I don't believe he knows the first thing about land."

"No," she assented, "I should not suppose he would know much of land."

"Oh, he's got a heap more sense than you'd think," protested Mr. Ramsey, who was ever just. "He's no fool, I can tell you."

"Indeed, is he not?" returned the girl, indifferently.

Then followed a moment of rather awkward silence, which neither seemed inclined to break, though each was conscious there was that which must be said. Then Mr. Ramsey, turning a deeper red, began a sentence having for its burden "In case the butcher might not have been around——"

"Where is it?" she asked him, humbly.

"On the stump beside the kitchen door."

"Thank you; I'll find it. You had better go in now and introduce your visitor to father. Mother is so apt to make mistakes in names, and he might not like being Mr. Ferguson, of Greenland."

"All right," assented Mr. Ramsey. "But say, I'll slip out after a while and help you fry them."

"What is *them?*"

"Sausages," whispered Mr. Ramsey, as one who gives a countersign. "And, by the way, there's something else. Foreigners, you know, can't drink water, so I just had them put in a bottle of white wine."

"Wine!" Myra cried, in consternation. "Good gracious, Mr. Ramsey; mother's temperance!"

"Whew!" whistled Mr. Ramsey. "I never thought of that! Then we can't have it, I suppose?"

"No, I am afraid not. I am very sorry."

"Oh, that's all right; you needn't be," he answered. "If people have principles, I believe in their living up to them. I seldom touch a drop myself, but I thought a glass of wine at dinner might make a good impression."

"We shall have to depend upon ourselves to make the good impression," Myra said, consolingly. "Ourselves and father's mineral water—it tastes like paint."

"I guess there must be sulphur in it," speculated Mr. Ramsey. "Just stow the bottle somewhere; it might be handy in case of sickness. I'll be along before you get to the sausages; they're apt to bust."

"I hope you will," she answered, cordially. "Mother has forgotten dinner long ago."

Before they parted—he going to the front door, she toward the lean-to kitchen by the path around the house—Mr. Ramsey said:

"He made a bluff at not wanting to stop to

dinner, but I told him you were not the folks to stand on ceremony. Wasn't that all right?"

"Oh, yes," she answered; "that describes us perfectly."

"He strikes you as well-mannered, don't he?" Mr. Ramsey asked, with some anxiety.

"Oh, yes," she said again. "Now go in before father comes down."

There were more small brown paper packages than usual upon the stump, and Myra, carrying them to the kitchen, paused to conceal one that gave forth melancholy glugs, beneath the kitchen step. As she did so she felt sorry that Mr. Ramsey should be disappointed in one of the small, considerate acts so characteristic of him. Perhaps later her mother might elect to take a nap; perhaps something else might happen. Favourable things generally happened when Myra had a plan on foot.

Through the door into the living room she could hear her mother leading in the conversation, and she inferred from this that her father was still upstairs, where she had seen him last gluing two pieces of wood together for some mysterious pur-

pose of his own. She could hear Mr. Ramsey being very much at home, and suspected him of showing off his intimacy before a stranger. Hitherto Mr. Ramsey's standing in the family had not been one of intimacy. As she cut the string about a plump and yielding package Mr. Ramsey's laugh rang clear above the rest.

One glance toward the sausages, another toward her own reflection in the little glass above the stove, and Myra was once more in the sunshine. A moment later she entered the front door, composed as one untrammelled by domestic cares.

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER III

THE room upon whose threshold Myra paused for an observant moment was of the same dimensions as the house, which, though contracted for a house, were generous for a room. About the four walls logs and intervening plaster alternated in horizontal bands of brown and white; small windows let in cool green forest light above muslin curtains. An open stairway occupied one end, and two other doors led respectively to kitchen and workshop in the lean-to wing.

Through the prevailing wholesome atmosphere of pine about the place there rose an under-smell of paint—blue paint. Everything paintable in sight had been painted blue, cerulean blue; the wooden chairs, the tufted chairs, the massive sofa, whose design and hair-cloth covering suggested nothing but veneer; the hanging *chalêt* clock, which had

no hands; even a cooking-stove with a pipe. On this a lamp appeared about to boil, the family Bible farther back, to simmer gently.

In the room sat Myra's mother and the two young men, Mr. Christensen in the hair-cloth seat of honour, Mr. Ramsey upon a trunk—blue also—and the lady on some article of furniture concealed beneath her skirts, which might have been an ottoman, but was, in fact, a nail-keg. The household chairs were, for the most part, recovering slowly from an overdose of paint.

At sight of the daughter of the house Mr. Ramsey looked up with momentary apprehension, and Mr. Christensen, being less at home, rose to his feet.

"Will you not have this seat?" he asked.

"Oh, thank you," Myra answered, as she passed him. "I will take the other corner. This sofa is the only really safe place in the house."

"It takes a little while to get to rights," remarked the agent, in his *rôle* of family friend.

The conversation, which had sounded so attractive through the door, now began to languish. Though Professor Dale did not appear at once, a

heavy footfall on the floor above announced that his coming might be expected at any moment, which was a discouragement to connected effort. Mr. Christensen, ignoring these sounds, affected interest in Mrs. Dale's lace, but Mr. Ramsey, more frank by nature, kept an eye upon the open stairs, and prophesied from time to time.

"He's coming this trip, sure."

"The trouble was," said Myra, when the talk came back to chairs, "that the paint got thick. Mr. Christensen, have you ever tried to paint a chair?"

Mr. Christensen had not. But he had once assisted in painting a boat. It had been a Swedish boat called the Raven, belonging to a fisherman whose name had been John Johns.

"How picturesque," commented Mrs. Dale, making a mental note of Johns for future use. "Quite like some Norseland poem."

"Mr. Christensen, are you fond of poetry?" inquired Myra, as one who opens an agreeable topic.

"Oh, yes," he answered, cautiously, "of some poetry."

"Do you know the saga of the 'Old Man of the Border'?"

"Is it by Scott?" he asked.

"I am not sure. Would you care to hear it?"

"Yes; very much, indeed."

"It is not long at all," said Myra, reassuringly; "just four lines—

> 'There was an Old Man of the Border
> Who lived in the greatest disorder.
> He danced with the cat, and made tea in his hat,
> Which distressed all the folks of the Border.'"

Mr. Ramsey laughed uproariously, but Mr. Christensen, affecting seriousness, pronounced the hero a sensible fellow.

"Would his manner of life have distressed you very much if you had known him?" Myra asked, meeting his eyes for one brief moment.

"Not if he had given me some tea, and invited me to join the dance," he answered, gravely.

"Myra, how can you be so silly?" her mother sighed, and circumstances put an end to the discussion.

"He's coming this time, sure," Mr. Ramsey announced again, triumphantly; which prediction

was presently fulfilled by a creaking on the open stairway and the appearance near the ceiling of a pair of feet clad in white socks and ample green list slippers.

The Professor, being a portly man, descended slowly, at every third or fourth step pausing altogether to regard the company below with obvious suspicion and distrust. His head, owing to an abundance of hair that fell about his shoulders and the fulness of his beard, appeared of unusual size, and suggested the head of a black lion. His eyes were large and dark, and would have been unduly prominent had the brows above them been less heavy, and they had the look in them of eyes that see only the distance clearly. The Professor was tall in stature, and the purple dressing-gown he wore, girded at the waist, tended to increase his apparent height. Upon the lower step he paused so long that Mr. Ramsey, inferring an intent to come no farther, introduced the visitor.

Professor Dale held up a hand as though in benediction.

"You are welcome, sir," he said, deliberately, in a deep and resonant voice. "Pray, sir, resume your

seat. Do I understand that you arrived at Thebes this morning?"

"Not so," replied the guest, still standing. "I came by the express last evening."

The Professor shook his head.

"I fear you found the Union House a wretched place, and its proprietor a coarse, offensive man," he said.

"We are going to have a hotel out here some day that will be something like," began Mr. Ramsey, vauntingly, but Myra interposed.

"Father," she said, "do you know they have houses just like ours in Sweden?"

"And why in Sweden, child?" demanded the Professor; which led to explanation on the part of Mr. Ramsey.

"My visit here is a reconnaissance," said Mr. Christensen, with caution. "We heard of this property through Colonel Blunt, but the entire project is still in the air, as one might say."

"I know of no region better suited for such an enterprise," responded the Professor, with conviction. He was never intentionally ambiguous.

"So?" inquired Mr. Christensen, alert for

information. "And may I ask your reasons, sir?"

The Professor's reasons were many, and he gave them willingly. Seating himself upon the lower step, which relieved his guest from the occasion for further standing, he dwelt at some length on the character of the Swedish people, whom he apparently held in high esteem. From this he went on to consider soil and climate generally, and only permitted himself to reach the pinelands by slow but logical advance.

"Cranberries," said the scientist, deliberately, announcing a new heading; "are you familiar with their culture, sir?"

Mr. Christensen was not, but if after many minutes his ignorance continued, he had but himself to blame.

Though during the discourse Mr. Ramsey moved uneasily at times, Myra and the visitor vied with each other in close attention to the end. Myra, because she always listened when her father spoke, and Mr. Christensen, perhaps, because he was in search of information.

"I am sorry, sir," remarked Professor Dale, in

abrupt conclusion, "that you did not come in time for dinner."

"Dear me," gasped Mrs. Dale, awakening to the claims of hospitality, and Myra, affecting to consider the remark a pleasantry, said dinner would be ready in half an hour.

"I trust so," said Professor Dale, without concern. To his guest he added: "If you will step into my workshop, sir, I will show you a contrivance of my own for pulling stumps which cannot fail to interest you."

A moment later, when the workshop door had closed, Myra and the agent sprang up with one accord.

"Dear me, what are you going to do?" demanded Mrs. Dale.

"Hustle," cried Mr. Ramsey, executively.

"Cook," answered Myra, with determination.

"Cook what?" demanded Mrs. Dale, nervously rolling up her lace.

"Sausages," responded Myra, reassuringly. "Mr. Ramsey is to show us how. You know they are apt to burst."

"I'll fry them as my mother used to do," de-

clared the agent, playfully. "Come on; there isn't any time to fool."

That Providence in creating Mr. Ramsey had made a master workman there could be no doubt. In the kitchen he gathered his tools with an unerring instinct of selection. He cooked as he would have developed photographs or adjusted a surveying instrument, and with as little conscious loss of dignity. Somehow, in the lean-to kitchen Mr. Ramsey became a man of greater dignity than he had seemed when at ease upon the trunk.

"There should be some biscuits somewhere," Myra observed, her head within a cupboard.

"Never mind looking for them," replied the agent. "I brought some bread along. I thought you might like a change. It's in one of those packages, and there are a lot of other things—I've most forgotten what." He had removed his cuffs and hung them on a nail. "I'll just take off my coat, if you don't mind," he said.

"Do whatever you please," responded Myra, sweetly. "I am going to help mother with the table, and perhaps I had better shut the door."

"Oh, I say," protested Mr. Ramsey, who had

not bargained for a solitary task. "It don't take two for that."

"No," she assented, laughing, "and it don't take two for this."

"It is unfair to leave him to do everything alone," her mother whispered when the door was closed.

"Mr. Ramsey considers freedom from restraint essential to good results," explained Myra.

From the workshop door, which had swung open on a crack, they heard the voice of the inventor.

"Twenty per cent. die before the age of six, and of these fully one-half do not attain the first year."

"So!" remarked another voice.

"Dear me!" sighed Mrs. Dale, "your father has begun to explain the baby incubator, and dinner must be nearly ready!"

From the other door appeared the face of Mr. Ramsey, flushed and resolute.

"I've got to have some sort of dish to put these things on," he announced, in tones betraying little of his former cheerfulness.

Myra fetched a large platter, which, being blue, did duty often as a decoration.

"I am sorry I forgot about it," she said. "I hope you found everything else you wanted."

"You have no call to concern yourself about me," he answered, frigidly.

"Oh, but I do," she protested, "even if this is entirely your party."

"All right," said Mr. Ramsey. "I ain't ashamed of doing anything that has to be done."

Almost before she had turned away he rather rudely pushed the door to with his foot, and Myra, with a flush of indignation on her cheeks, crossed to a window. This she did for the purpose of counting ten, or even twenty, for she was conscious of unfair dealing with the agent. At the end of a deliberate five she had resolved not to quarrel with anybody over sausages.

"I have been greatly interested," she heard a voice behind her saying. "Your father's inventions are most wonderful. Especially the one for washing babies."

"No, dishes," she corrected, laughing.

"Babies, I assure you," insisted Mr. Christensen. "Do you know that fully one-half never attain the first year?"

"That would be equally true of either," sighed the girl.

"Sir," said the Professor, in a voice of distant thunder, "will you take the place upon my right?"

"What shall we do about Mr. Ramsey?" demanded Mrs. Dale of her daughter, in an anxious aside.

"Sit down and leave him to his fate," the other answered, with composure.

The Professor moved to the head of the table, his wife toward its foot. Myra was to sit facing the two guests.

Mr. Christensen, before taking the place of honour, paused to adjust his hostess' seat. But, discovering this to be the nail-keg, he relinquished the purpose, not without embarrassment.

"Mine is a churn," remarked Myra, reassuringly; and, unfolding her napkin, she continued: "We live quite simply in the pines. I hope you do not dislike sausages."

From a narrow opening in the kitchen-door Mr. Ramsey watched the scene with lowering brows. In his hands he held the large blue platter, which, for a moment, he appeared about to hurl into the room.

"I thought you told us dinner was ready," observed the Professor, with a glance of disapproval at the board.

"I said it was not ready quite," his wife said, smiling sweetly.

"We have a proverb in my country," put in the Swede. "It is the guests that make the feast. We say it in fewer words, but that is the idea."

"Your language is so rich in proverbs," murmured Mrs. Dale, who welcomed the diversion.

"Bosh!" muttered the Professor. "Bosh, bosh, bosh!"

"Perhaps I had better go out and help—" Myra began, half rising, but the entrance of Mr. Ramsey cut her short.

"Do not trouble yourself, Miss Dale," he said, with dignity. Unflinchingly he put the big blue platter before his host, but as he did so his lips were firmly drawn together.

"They look delicious," exclaimed Myra, glancing up at him; but finding in the pale eyes no response, she added, meanly: "Was there not to be some mush?"

There was to be some mush, and Mr. Ramsey

fetched it; likewise the teapot and bread and butter. After this he made other trips to the kitchen, and returned from each with a new jar bearing an ornate label—chow-chow, mustard, jam, and honey, all of which he had selected that morning at the general store of Paul and Peter Shinn, in Thebes. Perhaps it pleased Miss Dale to fancy he had not meant them to appear thus in a body, but rather, as it were, in relays and reliefs, to serve as a serial reminder of the absent, each taking up its burden when its fellow was exhausted. But now, impelled by bitter wrongs, he forced them savagely open, throwing away the corks, and spread them lavishly, recklessly, before her, even as the tenor used in former times to shower gold upon Camille. "Permit me to offer you a coal of fire," he seemed to say. "Pray do not spare them; I have others in reserve."

"Oh, Mr. Ramsey, won't you please sit down," she cried at last, defending her plate from sugared ginger. "You must be awfully hungry."

"Thank you, Miss Dale," he hissed between his teeth. "You haven't any call to think of me."

"Our peasants have a saying," observed Mr.

Christensen, the time being ripe for a proverb, "that 'He eats best who eats last.'"

Myra regarded him suspiciously, but immediately lowered her eyes, perceiving that he also regarded her. And Mrs. Dale explained, though explanations were unnecessary with a guest who never seemed surprised at anything:

"We do not make company of Mr. Ramsey; we have known him so long."

"So!" said Mr. Christensen. "He is very much to be envied."

Perhaps this put the matter in a new light to Mr. Ramsey, who had not till then regarded his part in the entertainment as exceptionally fortunate.

"If you've all got what you want," he said, with an attempt at pleasantry, "I might as well get in before the books close." Presently he so far relented toward Myra as to accept a sausage at her hands.

The Professor, who, knowing his remarks to be deserving of undivided attention, commonly spoke little at table, now looked from one to another of the assembled jars and pots.

"My child, where on earth did all this indigestible rubbish come from?" he questioned.

"They were a present, father," said his ch
"You need eat only what you like—and don't
think it nice to have a variety?"

"I think it delightful," echoed Mrs. Dale,
was combining strawberry jam and sausage
evident relish.

"Yes; perfectly lovely," went on Myra, glad
the opportunity to make amends. "I never co
be in Park & Tilford's without wishing every
would go away and leave me alone with my c
science and a spoon."

"Are you often in the city?" inquired
Swede, with interest.

"Never now; but we lived there once—that
we lived in Astoria."

"So! That is a fine hotel. I know of few
Europe——"

"Oh, not the hotel! I mean the town."

"I am afraid I do not know it."

"You would not be very likely to go there
pleasure."

"Where is that, my child?" demanded the P
fessor, looking up from his plate.

"We were speaking of Astoria, father," M

explained. "I was advising Mr. Christensen not to go there."

"But that is very foolish," he returned, reprovingly. "It may be the very place where he would succeed the best." And, turning to his guest, he continued: "It is never safe, sir, to judge a given place until certain of what affinity may exist between it and the inquirer. If Jupiter is strong in your nativity, you might do worse, for there we find the quiet water, symbol of Pisces, which is, you know, the House of Jupiter."

"So!" assented Mr. Christensen. But it was evident that he did not know.

"Oh, father," interrupted Myra, turning crimson, "we were only speaking casually of Astoria. Nobody has any thought of going there."

"Humph!" grunted the Professor, relapsing into silence; and Myra began at once to talk of Mr. Ramsey's horse, a subject ever grateful to the owner of that worthy beast.

Mrs. Dale, when not occupied with some train of thought suggested by the talk, poured tea. She did this, as she did most of the practical things of life, badly, putting in the sugar last, and not

infrequently forgetting which cups were sweetened and which not.

If during the earlier part of the meal Mr. Ramsey abstained from food, his self-denial produced no visible effect upon the person whom its object was to sadden, and later he did much to justify the Swedish saying. As Myra had remarked, life in the pines was simple; and twenty minutes after the appearance of the blue platter the company joined the chickens before the door.

"If I were a rich man," proclaimed Mr. Ramsey, throwing out his chest and casting an approving eye about, "I should build me a nice, comfortable house right over there where you see that log. Yes, there's where it would be—right there and nowhere else." At dinner he had been at times not wholly at his ease; now, in the open, self-confidence set free, bounded a trifle. Stooping, Mr. Ramsey took a chip from the ground, which, with his penknife, he deftly split in two. "You may talk about your cities all you like; I would not have the best house in any of them as a gift, not if I had to live in it," he began afresh. But Myra, apprehensive lest

further division of the chip might result in a tooth-pick, borrowed the knife.

"Wouldn't you sooner have the little blade?" he asked, considerately.

"No, thank you; this will do," she answered, sweetly. "I only want to loosen the earth in this flower-pot."

"Then keep it till you see me again," he said. "If we are going to look at anything, I guess we had better get a move on us."

"I am at your orders," replied the visitor. "What shall you show me next?"

"We'll go down to the south boundary, I guess," replied the agent. "We can have a look at the land there, and, when we are good and ready, go back another way, by what we call the Ocean Road."

"So! And we shall go back another way?"

"Yes; it's nearer from where we'd be, and a long sight better road. I'll get you back to Thebes in time for supper, and after that you'll have two hours to get the train."

"That will do very well," agreed the other, with-

out enthusiasm; and, as an after-thought, he asked: "Does this land we are to see differ greatly from that we have already seen?"

"Not very much," admitted the agent, reluctantly. "It's a bit more rolling, and the trees are some bigger, and the soil——"

"Ah, the soil must be examined by others better qualified. I am only here to judge how the colonists would like the country. Our chairman is a believer in first impressions."

"In that case," put in the Professor, who had been alert for an opportunity to offer suggestions; "in that case I should advise a walk in the woods. One misses many beauties from the road. Now, in the direction of the mineral spring——"

"I guess that spring will keep a while," said Mr. Ramsey, bluntly, for with him the pointing out of boundaries was a passion; but Mr. Christensen seemed well-disposed toward the spring.

"You will find it a short mile, sir, and a pleasant walk," his host assured him.

"So! Then my vote is for the spring. Perhaps the ladies might be persuaded to accompany us,"

said Mr. Christensen, which courteous suggestion neither of the ladies thought best to hear.

"All right, you're the doctor," acquiesced the agent, with a touch of patronage. "Anyway, I guess walking would be pleasanter for anyone not used to buggies; but we'll have to step out lively to keep up with the Professor."

"So?"

"Father, here is your hat," said Myra, dutifully, after a momentary absence. As she held out the ample head covering she saw a thread upon the brim, which she removed with so much care that a glance of anxious inquiry directed toward her passed unobserved.

The Professor took the hat, and seemed to crown himself.

"This spring," he explained to those it might concern, "may possibly be of such importance as to bring about an entire change in the purposes of the Development Company. Fortunately, there is room here for a vast modern sanitarium."

It evidently occurred to the Professor that Mr. Ramsey had been, in a way, left out and over-

ridden, and now, to make amends, he seized that gentleman firmly by the arm, and, ever impatient of delays of which he himself was not the cause, impelled him toward the forest.

Mr. Christensen assumed the air of one who waits. Unseen by him Mrs. Dale and Myra exchanged a glance. It was not the first time these two had been left to save a situation. Mrs. Dale's head inclined toward the receding figures, and Myra's bent in comprehension.

"If you are ready, mother, perhaps we had better start," she said aloud.

"I don't think I shall go."

"So?" said Mr. Christensen, a chapter of regret in one syllable.

"We can overtake them in a moment," Myra said. "I will just run and get my hat." And so saying she disappeared around the corner of the house. When she returned the blue cotton sunbonnet was upon her head, and she held a package covered with brown paper in her hand.

"What in the world have you there?" inquired her mother.

"Only something to drink out of."

"Dear me! But do be careful of the spring; I'm sure it's poisonous."

"Yes, mother; I'll be careful."

"Myra," said her mother, in a histrionic whisper, taking advantage of an auspicious moment, "did you notice your father's feet?"

"Yes, mother; he had on his green slippers."

"Dear me!" sighed Mrs. Dale. "How dreadful!"

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER IV

MR. CHRISTENSEN begged to be allowed to carry the package, but Myra insisted on retaining it.

"If you wish to study the property and are not accustomed to walking on pine-needles," she said, "you will have quite enough responsibility."

"But I am not here to study anything," he protested. "I came only to bring back an impression."

As they set out briskly across the clearing, the others, who had been waiting on ahead, resumed their way. The Professor, moving with long, nervous strides, alternately grasped Mr. Ramsey by the arm to urge him forward or, where the path was narrow, drove him ahead as an impatient parent propels a reluctant offspring. As he walked he waved his arm in stately, sweeping gestures. His

deep, monotonous voice reverberating through the forest was like that of a Druid chanting strange antiphones.

For a time Myra and her companion made conscientious efforts to overcome their handicap, but once well in the forest such spurts became more difficult, and finally they lost sight of their leaders altogether. It was then that Mr. Ramsey gave vent to a reassuring woodland whoop.

"Please answer him," said Myra. "I haven't any breath."

"Nor I," declared the visitor. Nevertheless he gallantly complied.

After a minute Mr. Ramsey called again, this time apparently from a still greater distance. When Myra turned to her companion in implied command he gave a feeble "coo."

"That is not loud enough," she objected, and, standing still, lifted her own voice in a melodious yodel. Mr. Christensen immediately took up the bass, miraculously well for one so short of breath. It was characteristic of him that the right note should come without apparent effort, as Myra was beginning to perceive. Whether the song might

be of cranberry bogs or lace, Mr. Christensen's second was without a flaw.

"I am sure you could go faster without me," she said, regretfully, for the duet had cost them nearly fifty yards.

"Perhaps so," he admitted, laughing; "but, fortunately, I do not know the way."

"And, unfortunately, I do not either," she rejoined.

"So!" said her companion, coming to another halt, and regarding her with a consternation clearly disingenuous; and for a moment they stood quite still to listen. But whatever further woodland demonstrations the agent may have made were lost in the more aggressive calling of the pines.

"Perhaps they will come back to look for us," speculated Mr. Christensen.

"I am afraid not," Myra answered, flushing slightly. "Father is so forgetful when he is interested in anything, and you see this mineral spring is quite important."

"So!" assented Mr. Christensen, adding: "I should think anyone who could breathe this air would have little need of a mineral spring."

He had taken off his hat, and a resinous wind rumpled his northern hair. His blue eyes sought the forest vistas.

"This is my first full day away from the office all summer," he declared, with artful pathos, and Myra fancied him a trifle pale. Contrasted with the ruddy Mr. Ramsey he was decidedly pale.

"Shall we go back?" she suggested, hesitating. "Apart from father's spring the property is just like this for miles and miles."

"So!" said Mr. Christensen. "Then I should miss nothing."

"No, nothing," she assured him; "it is all the same—pines and sand, with here and there a clearing where the charcoal pits used to be, such as that one to the left where you see an opening through the trees."

"Charcoal?" repeated Mr. Christensen, at once deeply interested. And Myra, anxious to make amends for any loss of information her presence had occasioned him, became reasonably accurate concerning charcoal.

"I could explain about it better if you will come with me to the pit."

"Gladly," said Mr. Christensen, "or even to the abyss."

They retraced their steps along the uncertain, half-obliterated path to where a still fainter trail across the smooth brown crust of fallen needles led winding into the depths of the forest.

The trees were larger here than at the cross-roads, their branches interwoven overhead were like the wattle of an eagle's nest. As the afternoon drew on the autumn haze had thickened, and in the cool green tenebræ an infrequent sunbeam here and there fell as through painted glass. Myra had pushed back her blue sun-bonnet till it hung about her shoulders, leaving her bronze hair free. Her faded dress trailed noiselessly. As, holding her mysterious burden tight, she looked about a trifle anxiously for landmarks secret with herself, her figure grew significant, centring the interest of the picture in a touch of human purpose.

The young man held back a low-hanging bough till she had passed, and as he followed it swung again across the path as though a door had closed behind them.

"It was good of you to bring me here," he said,

forgetting that it was the same wood that had wearied him in the morning.

"Then you can reward me by dragging your feet as much as possible," she rejoined. "If I do not come here for a day the path almost disappears."

"And do you come here often?" he inquired.

"Yes; nearly every day. There is a birch-tree that is turning yellow, and a little pool."

"So!" The monosyllable expressed a personal sympathy.

"But you are to walk behind, you know," she reminded him. "And don't neglect to drag."

"We have a saying in Sweden," he returned, as he obeyed resignedly, "that when a woman wills to lead, the fiend himself must follow."

"I should have invented a better proverb if I were behind," commented Myra. "We have a saying in Astoria, 'If not sure of the merit of your ideas quote them as another's.'"

Mr. Christensen laughed a guilty laugh.

"Till now," he said, "I have found my Swedish proverbs most successful."

After some other moments of silent following, he remarked:

"Would not this be just the place where one might expect to meet a Nisse?"

"I should not know one by sight," she confessed across her shoulder. "I only know things that are mentioned in the Bible or the Patent Office reports. Please tell me what a Nisse is."

"That would be imprudent at this distance," he explained; "their hearing is remarkably acute."

"Really?" demanded Myra, slackening her pace and moving a little to one side. She did not believe in sprites, nor had she an implicit trust in her informant's facts; but no subject can be discussed with ease across one's shoulder.

With every outward sign of seriousness he told her of the Robin Goodfellow of the North; how helpful he could be at times, and of the tricks he played on sleeping peasants. There followed other bits of folk-lore, stories of familiar pixies she had known before with other names. Now meeting them again, with his grave blue eyes to give them actuality, they seemed new people in the pinelands, new settlers under Mr. Christensen's direction.

"I shall never walk here again without imagining I am about to meet one of your countrymen," she declared, laughing.

"I trust it will not always be in imagination," he replied. Which she took to be a reference to the colony.

"Of course I want the company to succeed," she said; "but don't you like it better as it is?"

About them was the murmur of the woods, the Song of the World at Peace, the Eden Song of Solitude. Before them new paths opened at every step, some leading into shadow, others to where the light lay warm; some ending but a little way ahead, and others infinitely long. It seemed that they might choose one of many ways, where all were free.

Presently they came out upon an ancient clearing, larger than that of the cross-roads and overgrown breast-high with the stunted oaks and laurels that follow when the pines are cut.

"This is the place," she said. "That bare spot was the pit where they used to burn the charcoal. There is the hut they lived in, and yonder beside the birch-tree is the water needed to keep the fire under control. You see it was most convenient."

Her voice reflected the anxiety her eyes expressed, that he should not be disappointed, having come so far. But perhaps the gentleman beside her was

quick to grasp commercial possibilities. At all events he asked no further questions concerning charcoal. Perhaps he saw only an autumn sky, gloriously bright after the shadow, the oak and laurel shrubs like a planted labyrinth in some old garden walled by sombre pines. One can find beauty almost anywhere when one is in the mood to seek it.

"Why did the charcoal people ever go away?" he asked, his eyes upon the ruined hut.

"I suppose they were driven off," she told him. "You see they had no right to be here. Even this miserable little scrap of earth, where they worked hard and lived as honestly as they knew how, belonged to someone else."

"So!" said Mr. Christensen, looking down at her, half in amusement, wholly in approval; "you and my uncle would agree. He says it took men a million years to discover that equality was self-evident, and then they straightway forgot the fact."

"Your uncle must be a very sensible man," she answered, warmly. "I am sure I should like him."

"I know you will," said Mr. Christensen, and

Myra reflected on the difficulties foreigners must have in mastering the finer shades of English.

This was not the first allusion to the uncle, whom Myra, with small reason, pictured as a large and very neat old gentleman. But apart from a few of his opinions she learnt no more of him that afternoon.

"Am I to be allowed no further than the edge of your domain?" asked the nephew. "You spoke of a spring, and I am very thirsty."

"But the spring is just as unpleasant as father's," she replied. "I think mine is flavoured with marl."

"So!" said Mr. Christensen; "but I am very thirsty."

"Then follow me," said Myra, entering the maze; and through a devious way she led him past the pit and ruined hut to where the birch-trees' autumn leaves hung quivering overhead or lay like yellow coins on the brown ground. A corporal's guard of pines surrounded it, and at its foot a little pool drew down a fragment of the autumn sky. The grass about the pool grew so green and tall it might almost have been rushes. Under the trees

were signs of Myra's former visits—a torn envelope, threads of wool, a branch she had made use of for a rake.

"Of course it is not really pretty," she explained, apologetically. "It is only so by contrast, as a solitary pine would be where everything is bright."

"But beauty must be beautiful wherever it is," objected Mr. Christensen, developing an unexpected taste for abstract argument, as he had not appeared to be greatly taken with the tree.

"No," she insisted, "even that ragged little flower, which is perfect where it is, would be only a blue spot in a field with others."

"Then it is foolish to remember that there may be others," he answered, philosophically. "And it is foolish just at present to remember anything except that this is a good place to sit down and rest while I bring you some water."

"Thank you," she answered. "You will find a china cup on the roots of the birch-tree."

As she chose a seat upon the ground at the foot of a convenient tree, her package recalled itself by a mysterious sound proceeding from within. From the pool Mr. Christensen called back, boyishly:

"There is a cricket in the cup; shall I bring him, too?"

"No," she replied; "be careful not to hurt him, and bring me the cup empty."

"Empty?"

"Yes, please."

When he had climbed the bank and knelt before her, offering the cup, she said:

"I have just remembered that I have a bottle of wine."

She had removed its wrappings and held Mr. Ramsey's tribute up complacently.

For once the Swede's blue eyes betrayed surprise.

"We have a saying in Sweden—" he began.

"We have a saying in Astoria—" Myra interrupted, warningly.

"We have a saying," he persisted, "that he who questions fortune runs a risk of an answer."

"Of course, I thought there would be a larger party," she explained, "and father's spring might be untasteable—" And, with rueful eyes upon her treasure, "I never thought at all about the cork."

"So!" said Mr. Christensen. "Then I was the

more prudent." And he drew from his pocket a knife of many blades, one opportunely spiral. "I have brought also something else that may be useful," he added, exhibiting a silver telescopic cup. "In case I should happen to find a bottle of wine in the woods," he explained.

When he had filled the silver cup for her, the other one for himself, he said:

"Now you must propose a toast."

"But I do not know any," she protested. "I have scarcely ever tasted wine before. What do people generally say?"

"In Sweden we give sentiments," he answered. "I will tell you one my uncle has translated if you will touch my cup with yours and drink a pledge."

Myra assented, laughing, and obeyed instructions, striking the silver rim of her cup against his china one.

"Remember that it is a pledge!" he said.

"To me and you
When skies are blue.
To you and me
When tempests be.
To both together
In every weather!"

"But that is not fair!" she protested, flushing.

"I thought you were going to say 'Skoal to the Norseman, skoal!' or something like that."

"I am sorry that you do not approve of my toast," he said, repentantly; "but I am afraid it is now too late to take it back."

Myra, looking straight into the forest, sipped her cup.

"Does all wine taste as sour as this?" she asked him, with a slight grimace.

"No; sometimes it is sweeter—though this is excellent," he answered, taking a generous draft unmoved.

Myra ventured upon another cautious sip.

"It must be fresh," she speculated, doubtfully, "because they manufacture it in Thebes."

"So?" said Mr. Christensen. "Then we may be certain it is absolutely fresh."

The confidence with which he spoke was reassuring, though after this the bottle ceased to be a factor.

When, following several changes, he found a comfortable seat directly facing her, he asked permission to light a cigarette; and Myra, nodding

her consent, tried to recall anyone whom she had known who would have thought the question needed in the open air.

Observing the silver case beside him on the needles, she remarked:

"What a variety of attractive things you carry in your pocket."

"That box was a present from my uncle," he replied. "Would you care to see it close?"

"I should, if you will throw it to me without getting up," she admitted.

One side displayed a monogram in which the letter C alone was unmistakable. The other in enamel, a young lady of the ballet in the act of smoking, her attitude, as that of a cat beside her, expressing reposeful satisfaction. Beneath the picture was a mysterious word of two syllables.

"And what does 'Ron-ron' mean?" inquired Myra.

"I do not know in English," he replied; "but it is the song of a cat when contented."

"Oh, yes; purring," she interpreted, turning again to the picture. The lady with the cat appeared to laugh. Aside from certain eccentricities

of costume she was a young lady one would not mind looking like.

An accidental pressure of a spring opening some concealed compartment released many wax matches, which fell into her lap. These Myra gathered carefully together and restored; but when the lid was closed again one had been overlooked, and lay suggesting daring possibilities.

Above Mr. Christensen, against his tree, blue wreaths of smoke floated in the still air, grew thin, and disappeared. And their production seemed to afford him a sufficient reason for doing nothing else. It was unfair that, when two were equally idle, one should be given such advantage—that one alone should have the purring faculty.

Myra put one of the little rolls of paper between her lips and paused; an experiment which need have gone no farther.

"Would you like a light?" he asked, regarding her with interest but without concern.

"Thank you," she answered; "there are matches here."

Myra's results were creditable for a first attempt; that is, she did not actually cough, and the tears

which started to her eyes at times remained unshed.

"You are getting on beautifully," remarked Mr. Christensen, with encouraging patronage, at the same time parading his own proficiency.

"I wish I could make a ring," she rejoined, in humble admiration. "But I suppose it takes a long time to become thoroughly depraved."

"And even then," he answered, seriously, "one should possess a natural gift to be successful."

"You are not at all encouraging," she declared, throwing the half-burnt cigarette away. As she did so some ashes fell upon her dress.

"Be careful or you will set yourself on fire," he cautioned her.

"That would fulfil my horoscope," she answered, laughing. "Some day I am to be in great peril through fire."

Mr. Christensen's blue eyes opened wider.

"And has some stupid fortune-teller told you that?" he asked, without alarm.

"No," she replied. "I read it in my horoscope myself. I was born under Taurus, you know, with Venus in the ascendant on her throne in dexter square, with Mars afflicted in a house of fire. Is not that absolutely convincing?"

"You are not serious," asserted Mr. Christensen.

"Oh, yes; indeed I am," she insisted; "serious but not frightened. With Venus so well placed and powerful I am almost certain to be rescued. I hope it will be by someone nice."

"By one whom you will marry," he suggested, rather vehemently.

"Perhaps so," she assented, lightly. "But if the planets are often vague about such things it is because we do not know how to read them. A little detail easy to overlook makes so much difference. Some unimportant aspect——"

"And what, pray, is an aspect?" he interrupted her to ask.

"An aspect," she explained, "is where two bodies come within each other's radius of influence——"

"One does not need the wisdom of the ages to understand that much," he declared. "When two bodies are within each other's influence, what generally happens?"

"That would depend," she told him, conscientiously, "on whether the aspect was good or bad, or if another body interposed——"

"So!" said Mr. Christensen, with increasing interest. And at that moment the woodland whoop of Mr. Ramsey rang cheerily among the trees.

"We must go back," cried Myra, springing to her feet.

"Why?" he demanded, following her example; "because the other body interposed?"

Swiftly and almost in silence they retraced their steps, almost with a guilty consciousness of truancy. Not till the cross-road clearing showed between the trees did they exchange a dozen sentences. Then he said:

"Please wait one moment. This Mr. Ramsey may not allow me another opportunity to thank you for showing me the charcoal pit."

"Oh, that was nothing," she protested, hastily; "it was through me you missed seeing a great deal more of the property."

"One should not attempt to learn too much in a single visit," he replied, so earnestly that it was impossible not to understand his meaning. Whatever the fate of the colony might be, this was not their last meeting.

Myra turned away her head.

"Then you are coming back?" she tried to say, without undue concern.

"Yes," he said, softly. "If I may."

As she took a step toward the cross-roads he caught her hand and held her back.

"If I may," he said again. "If you tell me that I may."

"But what have I to do with it?" she asked, drawing away from him.

"Everything," he answered.

With an effort she released her hand, then turned to face him. Her heart beat wildly and her eyes were bright.

"I do not believe you, Mr. Christensen," she said, resolutely. And for the moment this was true. She had never before known anyone so tall, so carefully attired, so absolutely the master of himself, so far beyond the radius of her influence, she thought, and this with no depreciation of herself. It had simply happened in the chance of things that she and he were separated by an earth's diameter, as snow-flakes fallen at opposing poles.

"At least you will not forbid me to come back," he urged.

Myra laughed. New light had come to her, and by it she could see her bearings clearly, so she thought.

"Yes, I forbid it," she rejoined. "I forbid you absolutely to come. That gives our walk what my mother calls an artistic ending, and you need never think of it again."

"And shall you forget it?" he demanded, as he moved beside her.

"Oh, no, indeed," she assured him; "but then I shall see the birch-tree every day. To-morrow the bottle will be there to remind me."

"And some day I shall be there to remind you," he insisted; which speech, being in the nature of an anticlimax, deserved no response.

"Hello!" called Mr. Ramsey, catching sight of them. "How far did you folks get?"

"To Robin Hood's barn and back," Myra answered, gaily. "Another time we will keep to the travelled road."

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER V

BESIDE the wood-pile Mr. Ramsey's horse was undergoing harnessing. But his ears, thrown back in token of displeasure, came forward on the approach of one who sometimes made atonement with sugar for unkind things said behind his pale brown back. Mr. Ramsey's ears were, figuratively, also back, but he, too, had a taste for sugar. A very little went a long way with both the agent and his horse.

"Did you get anything out of him?" inquired Mr. Ramsey, in a whisper, as he looked up from a trace. Mr. Christensen, who had gone on, now stood with Mrs. Dale among her fowls, quite out of hearing.

"What do you mean?" demanded Myra, puzzled for the moment by the sudden change of focus.

"Did he express any views about the property?"

"Oh, yes; he seemed to think some things about it very pretty."

"Pretty!" Mr. Ramsey wound the breeching-strap three times about the shaft.

"Yes; nice for settlers, I suppose. But, of course, he would not tell me if he meant to buy it."

"He's cute enough to keep that to himself," commented Mr. Ramsey, drawing the strap tight and buckling it. "What else did he say?"

"Oh, very little."

Mr. Ramsey chuckled.

"I guess he ain't much used to being with ladies," he speculated. "He talked all right with me. I'm glad you took him to the pit. There's money in charcoal."

"What did you think of the spring?" Myra asked. "Is there anything in that?"

Mr. Ramsey smiled mysteriously.

"There's iron in it, sure," he said.

"Do you think so, really?"

"Yes; I fished out an old kettle that the burners must have thrown in. It was rusty, and had turned the water red." Mr. Ramsey laughed outright as he recalled the humour of the situat on, but, seeing

that his listener did not join, he added, hastily: "It was a joke on the Professor, but I'm glad that foreign fellow wasn't along."

A little later Myra, seated on the lean-to step with her head against the door-post, watched Mr. Ramsey climb into his buggy and disappear behind the house. She heard her mother call a blithe good-bye, and guessed, from certain words of Mr. Ramsey's, that the buggy-wheel had grazed the sun-dial stump—some obvious pleasantry about "taking time," at which Mr. Christensen had laughed, though she was sure he did not think it funny.

"We shall hope to see you here again," called Mrs. Dale, and Myra, from her door-step, threw a chip at Brigham Young, who chuckled mockingly at her from around a corner.

Then silence fell upon the pinelands, and the chill of autumn afternoon. By-and-by, when it was nearly dark, she heard the whistle of the tannery in Thebes, eight miles away; and wondering that it should be so late, Myra rose and went in to find her mother.

In the living-room beside a lamp Mrs. Dale corrected proof.

"Why, Myra, where on earth have you been?" demanded the good lady, looking up.

"Oh, nowhere in particular," replied her daughter, truthfully.

"Then why were not you here to say good-bye to Mr. What's-his-name? He must have thought it odd."

"I don't believe my absence distressed him very much," said Myra.

"At least he was polite enough to notice it," rejoined her mother. "He said some very pleasant things of you—that you were well-informed, or some double word like that."

"Dear me!" sighed Myra. "How very plain he must have thought me."

"Plain? Why should you think so?"

"Yes, mother; the degrees of unattractiveness in a girl are: Positive, well-informed; comparative, well-meaning; superlative, good-hearted. I must be only positively ugly."

"Why, Myra," Mrs. Dale protested; "if you would only take more trouble with your hair you would be quite good-looking."

"I don't aspire to be good-looking, or any other

double word," Myra replied, disdainfully; and the conversation turned to the proof, arrived that day by courtesy of Mr. Ramsey.

"They have left out everything I thought good," declared the writer, giving the offending sheets a vicious slap. "It is bad enough to twist my story to suit the illustrations they have on hand, and to interlard every conversation with household recipes, but to make an honoured grandparent die in forty words is more than one can bear with patience."

"It's murder," Myra cried, with sympathy, "premeditated murder."

"I suppose their wretched cheque is in that blue envelope," went on Mrs. Dale. "I haven't had the heart to open it."

When each had guessed a value for the cheque far lower even than the modest probabilities, the unsealing of the blue envelope brought all the charm of unexpected fortune.

"I don't know when we have been so rich," said Myra, as she opened the family Bible. "Remember, mother, I have put it in the Second Book of Kings."

"As it is so much better than we thought," her mother said, with rising cheerfulness, "you ought to have another frock at once—some soft, clinging stuff of a delicate green."

"No, mother; not this time," Myra protested, stoutly. "This cheque must be distributed in prizes for incivility among our tradesmen. First prize to Michael Brady, butcher, for gross profanity relating to the purchase of a turkey upon the instalment plan. Second prize to Paul and Peter Shinn, general merchants, for reflections on the financial standing of applicants for canned goods. And a small consolation prize to Murray, the fishman, really debarred from competition by saying there was no hurry."

"I suppose you are right," sighed Mrs. Dale, turning to her proof once more. "But really it does seem like throwing one's work away."

Myra took a seat upon the trunk, and in doing so one foot mysteriously disappeared.

"Has Reggie proposed to Laura yet?" she asked.

"Not yet," her mother said, dispiritedly. "I had to break off to spill ink on her white satin dress, just

to show how the stain could be taken out with Excelsior Eradicator, though when I tried it on the lining of your father's hat it left a horrid spot. And then I had to make a Lincoln pudding——"

"I don't mind so much spoiling your readers' clothes," commented Myra, "but, mother, do you think it right to introduce fiction into their digestive organs?"

The mother sniffed disapproval of her daughter's levity, and with a pencil substituted "pinch" for "peck" as the quantity of cinnamon in the recipe for Lincoln pudding. And Myra went on helpfully:

"Mother, I have changed my opinion concerning Reggie. He does not really care for Laura. He only wants to make her think he does, and then go away and never come back."

"Nonsense," rejoined the writer, with authority. "You know nothing of life. If a man admires a girl at all he will want to marry her as long as she treats him badly. It's his nature; and besides I have a picture of a christening to introduce."

Here further discussion was prevented by the appearance of Professor Dale from the workshop.

He held a lighted candle in his hand, which, pausing on the threshold, he raised above his head as though unconscious that the living-room was already well illuminated.

"Were there no letters?" he inquired, dividing a searching and suspicious gaze impartially between wife and child.

"Yes, father," answered Myra, getting to her feet, "there were several for you. I thought you were tired after your walk, or I should have brought them to you."

"Do so now," he commanded, solemnly; and, turning, went back into the workshop, the candle still aloft.

"I shall stay and help him," said Myra, in a whisper, as she took the letters from the table. "There are only two or three, so I sha'n't be long."

"Oh, I do wish you would not encourage him," her mother sighed. "Why can't you make him give it up? He is getting dreamier and dreamier every day, and I don't know how it is going to end."

"Oh, it will end all right," responded Myra, hopefully. "Father is just as he has always been,

and the horoscopes are really the only amusement he has."

"I don't consider it a nice amusement to deceive people and take their money for doing it," declared Mrs. Dale, with spirit.

"But he does not take their money," Myra asserted; "not a penny. He spends it all in advertising."

"For other clients," put in Mrs. Dale; but "clients" was not the word she would have liked to use.

"And every one of them will get excellent advice," said Myra, stoutly, "worth one dollar many times over."

It was an argument whose give-and-take—now grown perfunctory—had lost the zest of unexpectedness, like a game played too often.

"Try and come out by nine," said Mrs. Dale, returning to her proof, "and we will make mock oysters on the chafing-dish."

The Professor in his arcanum by the light of a single candle made a picture to persuade one that the centuries had been cut in twain. About the workshop, little larger than a cell, strange mechan-

isms cast their uncouth shadows on the walls—the infant incubator, the whirlpool washer, the collapsible circus-seat, the power pump. Between these everywhere were books and bottles, tools and test-tubes, and all the random rubbish that the inventive faculty gathers to itself.

Seated at a table, the Professor had already prepared himself for the task in hand. Blank paper lay before him, and his stubby fingers held a stubby pencil, with which he tapped impatiently.

Myra laid down the letters, and drew up a soap-box for herself.

"Are you ready, father?" she inquired, dutifully.

The Professor frowned and opened a memorandum-book, containing pages of minute calculations.

"I have been revising my figures for the conjunction of Saturn and Uranus," he announced, "and I find an error which may make the catastrophe of January 6th some hours later than we have expected. It is as well that I discovered this error before sending my results to Washington."

"To Washington?" inquired Myra. "Why, father, can you patent catastrophes?"

"No," answered the Professor, still preoccupied; "they have been too long in general use. I simply wish my predictions registered at the Smithsonian under seal."

"And what do you suppose is going to happen, father?" Myra asked. Some years earlier conjunctions of the Great Malefics always filled her with alarm. Later she had gained a certain confidence in the ability of the earth to resist influences which must have proved disastrous to a less hardy planet.

The Professor with his stubby pencil made a figure in his calculations more distinct.

"I look for widespread desolation in every phase of moral and physical being," he answered, cheerfully, as he closed the book, and added, still more cheerfully, "Now to business."

There were other horoscopes to be cast than those which the mail had brought that day, and Myra, who had filed the applications on a skewer, removed the lowermost.

"This is a woman," she announced. "Her name is Florence, and she was born in Boston in '75. She asks if she will be successful in her present undertaking."

"Success!" repeated the astrologer. "That i what they all expect. Success, long life, and happ marriages, in return for stupidity, idleness, an dishonesty. Fools! One could read their nativitie in their empty faces. Retrograde planets—Sol be low the earth; a waning moon!" He shook hi shaggy mane and brought his fat, blunt finger down upon the table. "One day," he resume "there will be a Court of Science to determine b the horoscope whether an infant shall be allowed t live."

"How cruel!" cried Myra, shivering a little i spite of long familiarity with the idea.

"No more cruel than that we should go on rea ing bats in the belief that they may turn out nigh ingales," replied her father, solemnly, though h would by no means have shortened the existence c a bat.

The Professor now drew a circle with his stubb pencil, using the cover of a mustard-tin for guide. This figure he divided into quadrants b two intersecting lines, and these again into third until the diagram resembled a twelve-spoked whee Myra meanwhile followed the operation with clo attention.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was the old enchantment, the old hallucination of the Chaldean magi, the belief that is the child of strong desire; that, as the planets meet and pass and range themselves in square and trine, they move in step to firmamental harmonies, whose measure all things tread; that, having seen the unknowable above, man may know the unseen below.

"I am ready," said the Professor, without looking up, and Myra read the day and date and hour of Florence's nativity.

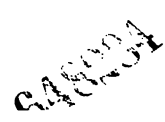
From a heap of tattered almanacs her father took that current at the birth of Florence, and, after some simple calculations, he said:

"She is a Capricorn."

"And is that good or bad?" inquired Myra, folding her arms upon the table.

"As God wills," answered her father, seriously. "The sign shows only if the clay be coarse or fine. We do not stop to weigh ingredients too nicely, knowing that for every ounce touched by the Master tons will be scattered on the highways. The planets are the fingers of Omnipotence."

Though the Professor said much more he was not idle. As he talked he added hieroglyphics to



his diagram. First, the zodiacal signs, one at the end of every spoke, till the drawing might have been the dial of a strange clock. After that he scrawled the symbols of the planets here and there at random seemingly—the shield and spear of Mars, the Crux ansata of Venus, the sickle of Saturn, the caduceus of Mercury, and last, the dragon's head and tail, which are the nodes of the moon. When he had finished he exclaimed:

"Poor wretch! She will never know happiness nor ease nor peace. She will pass her life in the service of others, and die disgraced before the age of thirty. Can you remember that, my child?"

"Yes, father," Myra answered; "but of course we could not write her that."

"No, I suppose not," said the Professor. "You may write that she has an unselfish nature, which finds its joy in ministering to the wants of others. Say that her life will be one of activity, rather than of change. Caution her to be prudent in dealing with the opposite sex, and add that she has a scar or blemish on her face."

"But, father, shall I really tell her that?" inquired Myra, for the horoscopes were rarely so explicit as to details.

Again the Professor consulted his diagram.

"Omit the scar," he said. "I see now that it will be caused in the future by a hammer or some blunt instrument. Yes, we must omit the scar."

Following Florence came the nativity of a gentleman who spelled birthday with an "e" and February with one "r." As his aspirations were toward journalism the advice to follow elementary studies for a year and seven months was worth a dollar fully.

"Here is another woman," Myra announced, apparently continuing to take the applicants in order. "Her name is Mary Doyle." And had the Professor ever noticed anything he would have seen his daughter's cheeks grow red.

"A cook!" he said, in comment; "and probably a bad one."

"I am almost sure she is not a cook," protested Myra. "She was only twenty on her last birthday, and her writing is not so very bad."

"How is her spelling?" asked the scientist, as he found the proper almanac.

"Perfect," Myra answered, with a touch of indignation.

"She is a daughter of Taurus," muttered the Professor, turning over leaves.

"And what are the characteristics of Taurus?" Myra asked.

"Obstinacy, impulsiveness, and self-will," recounted her father, recalling his authorities. "Adapted for city rather than for country life; hospitable, but, with bad aspects, over-fond of pleasure. Ptolemy gives patience, but I should say a roving disposition."

"I don't believe she is very patient," suggested Myra; adding, hastily: "So few girls are. What does she look like?"

"She evidently interests you," her father remarked; "but a woman's personal appearance has a certain bearing on her destiny. The females of Taurus are commonly plump," he continued, using the brusque language of the masters; "the eyes are dark and far apart. The hair is often tufted on the forehead, and should no planet aspect the ascendant, is often red in hue. The mouth is wide the complexion clear and inclined to high colour and, unless Mercury be well placed, the expression will suggest a bull."

"Do look where Mercury is!" cried Myra, in alarm; and as her father's stubby pencil scrawled the symbols of the planets she watched the process narrowly. Fortunately, Mercury was not ill-placed, and rather strong, which gives intelligence, and Venus, lady of the ascendant, was powerful.

"A pleasing personality," astrology proclaimed her; "in fact, decidedly good-looking."

"And not the least bit like a bull," insisted Myra.

"In this case," the Professor assured her, "such a suggestion would be wholly absent."

Myra breathed a sigh of evident relief. "Father, are the Taurus people very deceitful?" she asked.

"No, child," he answered; "if true to their inheritance they are the princes of the zodiac." Leaning back in his chair, he raised his eyes to the pine ceiling of his lean-to laboratory, and spoke as though he read strange writings there. "At the moment when the Almighty breathed into Adam the breath of life Taurus the Bull entered the great furrow of the heavens, signifying that those who bear the yoke by strength shall master. For how

long, for how many untold ages he led the zodiac, we do not know. Nor can we tell how the more crafty Aries, the wandering ram, the dodger, the explorer, came to usurp his place. It is enough that, following the same law of retrogression, we see far in the future the reign of Pisces dawning—the age of quiet rivers, of peace and beauty, and thoughts that float in astral light. The bull was of the triplicity of earth, the ram is of fire, the fishes shall be of water."

The astrologer's deep voice vibrated in the narrow room like a bell. His words, whether meaningless or full of meaning, seemed to reveal the vast unwritten secrets of the cabala.

"This is the significance of Taurus," he went on. "The equilibrium of will and mind; the balance of power and obedience; the universal soul; the universal life. His astral colour is red—tawny red, like the hide of a bull, like the hair of Adam. His jewel is the emerald, emblem of fecundity and of growing things. His month is April, the time of planting. His tarot is the lovers. His hieroglyphic is the eye of God."

To Myra, conscious of unworthiness, this

sounded like a prophecy of evil, a judgment on herself.

"Father!" she cried, "please don't tell me any more. I wanted only to hear of the lucky days you sometimes give people, and whether they are likely to travel, and so on."

The Professor laughed unmirthfully.

"True," he said, "and Mary Doyle has no doubt been forsaken by her lover. Let us see if he will come back to her."

"Father," Myra confessed, boldly, "I am Mary Doyle. That is my horoscope, and I meant to deceive you into telling me about myself." The Professor received this information as a wise judge hears a bit of unsupported evidence; and, taking up the diagram, he studied it attentively for a moment before announcing judgment.

"No," he said, finally, "it is a far cry between the impulse and the act, the desire and the deed. This figure shows you quite incapable of deceit. Your actions may be ill-advised, but never mean."

"I made a horoscope once for myself, but I was not at all certain how to read it," she went on, in the fervour of confession.

"Naturally," assented the Professor, adding, amiably: "Some day when you are old enough I will explain it to you."

"But, father, I am twenty now," protested Myra.

"An age of folly," replied the Professor. "Go, child, you waste my time."

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER VI

FOR several weeks life at the cross-roads went by unmarked in its passing as the shadows of the pine-trees. Once Murray, the fishman, returning from Thebes along the Ocean Road, announced that there were no letters, and was naturally suspected of having forgotten to call at the post-office. Once one of Mr. Ramsey's men, who rode over on a mule to offer unwilling service in the matter of chores, brought a note from his employer addressed to "Professor Dale and Family." The necessities of the cranberry bog would, it seemed, prevent Mr. Ramsey's visiting Pineopolis for several days. Once the Professor, discovering the bones of a prehistoric animal near his mineral spring, spent the afternoon in excavations; but as he did not allude to the subject in the evening, his family thought it best not to do so.

But the cross-roads were not all the pinelands, and Myra had made a discovery of her own.

This happened on the day that followed the v of Mr. Ramsey and the gentleman from Swed Myra had gone, as was her daily custom, to charcoal pit, and there had spent an active h hour. At the end a bottle had been buried wit china cup beside it, and the knoll beneath the bir trees swept as free from signs of former revelry a broom of pine-twigs can sweep. One token o could not well be done away with—a silver dropped and forgotten. But this was not the covery.

The Professor's family, after a month in Pi opolis, could repeat from memory a list of th who during that time had passed along the ro The agent had spoken of a house a mile or m from the cross-roads, whose owner he suspected lack of reverence in the matter of landmarks; the man was of the pariah caste of "pinelande and it seemed improbable that the distance betw the neighbours would ever be lessened. Theref it was with a start that Myra, resting by the p looked up to find the gaze of two other pairs of fixed wonderingly upon her.

These eyes, belonging to two ragged childı

were set in faces dirty to the last degree attainable by childhood. Above them shocks of tangled, unkempt hair suggested in colour nothing so much as the tail and mane of Mr. Ramsey's horse.

"Goodness!" exclaimed Myra. "Where under the sun did you come from?"

At this the taller of the couple gave vent to an inarticulate grunt; an evident desire for flight was held only by the single strand of curiosity. To other questions he—the creature's sex was most imperfectly expressed in rags—replied with like civility, and only after some time did he confess to the name of Aleck.

"Aleck what?" asked Myra. "What is your other name?"

"Nawthin'," drawled the boy, balancing himself on one grimy foot, while with the toes of the other he scratched a grimy calf.

"Is that your little brother?" Myra asked, in tones of friendly interest.

"Naw," drawled the boy, contemptuously. "That's me sister."

"And what's her name?"

"Sis."

"What are you and Sis doing here?"

"Nawthin'."

At that moment a frog who had been eavesdropping lost interest and leaped into the water with a splash, and at the sound the younger child, glancing cunningly in the direction of the pool, twitched her brother's sleeve. It was almost the first sign that either had given of consciousness of things about them, and Myra, recognising in the girl a higher intelligence, said to her:

"Are you looking for anything?"

"Frawgs," she replied, impassively.

"Oh, you are looking for frogs! What do you want of them?"

"Nawthin'," said the boy.

"Kill 'um," said the girl.

"Why do you do that? Do you eat them?"

"Naw!" answered both at once, in evident disgust.

"Now, children," said Myra, firmly, "I want you to understand you are not to touch that frog. He is mine. He belongs to Myra Dale, and if you harm in any way, or even tease him, I will punish you. I am a powerful fairy, and if you are good I can give you lots of pretty things."

CHAPTER SIX

Had her hearers been afflicted with total deafness neither threat nor promise could have been received with fewer outward signs of comprehension. So she asked again:

"Do you know what a fairy is?"

"Naw," replied the boy.

"What, never heard of a fairy? Have you ever heard of New York?"

"Naw."

"Have you ever heard of heaven?" The sequence was imperfect, but the voice was kind.

"Naw."

"Have you ever heard of God?"

"Naw," from the boy.

"Yes," from the girl.

"Oh, Sis has heard!" persisted Myra, much encouraged. "Tell me, child, who is God?"

"His last name's Dam," faltered the child, snuffling.

Myra eyed the small speaker narrowly, uncertain whether to attribute the reply to infantile wickedness or to unimaginable ignorance. In either case she felt the moment ill-adapted to reproof, and her heart softened toward the waif of

the pineland with the pity of the weak for the weaker, of the poor for the poorer, of those who have little to give for those who have everything to ask. She held out her hand to the child, and, the overture meeting with no response, displayed the contents of her work-bag, which—being of the household of Dale—contained attractions not usual in work-bags. Thus she was able to exhibit, in addition to an exceptionally varied array of spools, four lumps of sugar, a fruit-knife, and a chenille monkey of the brilliant colouring common to his species.

Gradually the little girl crept nearer, and the boy, with greater caution, followed, till both, breathing audibly, they came so close that their brown toes, twitching like nervous fingers, scattered the brown needles upon her dress. Seemingly unconscious of their movements, as is the fakir who plays a pipe to the slow uncoiling of an infatuated cobra, the charmer continued her wiles, which, after several minutes, were rewarded by a grunt of recognition. The direct provocation of the sound was a statement concerning the tastes and habits of the ape; and, greatly encouraged, the exhibitor went on:

"Yes, indeed, he eats sugar, and sleeps in the needle-book."

"Huh!" ejaculated Sis, sceptically.

"Arrah, yer lie!" protested Aleck, but not uncivilly.

After this confidence grew rapidly, and soon the children, squatting on the ground, spoke as freely as a limited vocabulary and little practice in the art of conversation would permit. In response to innumerable questions it appeared that there was a house somewhere in the forest inhabited by a man who kept a great many pigs. The man was "Dad," and a woman who figured vaguely in the narrative was "Mam." Most of the questions had to be repeated in simpler language, and it soon became apparent that such words as "father," "mother," and "home" conveyed but a dim meaning to the children. They did not know if they loved dad or mam; they did not know if they liked the lumps of sugar, and the one emotion they displayed was that of fear of the pigs. Of these animals the children appeared to live in terror, and they spoke of them only after much persuasion, and then with lowered voices. Pressed for a reason,

the girl was silent, but the boy, after glancing behind him, whispered that the pigs had once eaten a kid; and no cross-examination could shake this statement.

"But you don't mean a child?" argued Myra, to whom the matter seemed but a delusion of the little, undeveloped brain. "That would be impossible."

"I say they did," insisted the boy, sullenly, and the girl nodded her head.

"But pigs do not eat people; they eat—" Myra paused to recall information on the subject—"they eat vegetables."

"They eats hosses," growled the boy, savagely.

"Indeed, they do not," protested Myra, warmly.

"How'n hell d'you know; you ain't seen 'em?" broke out the boy. "They'd eat dad! they'd eat mam; they'd eat me, and Sis; they'd eat the hull damned lot of us!"

At this the girl began to cry silently, her whole dirty little body shaken with curious inward sobs. Myra laid her hand gently upon the tangled mass of sun-bleached hair, but the child shrank from her in terror, and it was plain that she did not know the meaning of a caress.

"Can't you do something to quiet her?" asked Myra, appealing to the boy. Aleck hesitated a moment, and then reluctantly slapped his sister on the cheek. The reluctance made the action seem less brutal, and the effect of the blow was evidently soothing, for the girl stopped crying, although her sobs continued at lengthening intervals for several minutes. The conversation now turned to the effect of brambles upon the human leg, and then to other subjects of general interest, until the sound of a saw-mill whistle, sometimes audible with a favourable wind, announced the hour of mid-day.

"Now, children," said Myra, gathering her belongings together, "come with me to my house, and I will show you lots of pretty things, and give you something to eat."

But once upon their feet the children were again the timid, half-wild creatures whose curiosity had for a moment conquered fear. Before the invitation could be repeated they had backed stealthily from her, and, wheeling suddenly, fled like frightened pine-mice into the forest.

Myra reserved the story of her meeting with the children until some time when her mother might be

in the mood to hear it; as for the Professor, sh knew it would not interest him, for had she en countered a caravan of camels in the pines, the circumstance would but have served as text for a discourse upon Mahometanism. At dinner, however, she asked, generally:

"Pigs have never been known to eat human beings, have they?"

"Oh, yes," replied Mrs. Dale, seeing nothing unusual in this or any other question. "I remember when I was a girl hearing about an old man in the town we lived in who became intoxicated and fell asleep in a pen."

She did not relate the sequel of her story, and her daughter did not ask for it. Then the Professor spoke:

"There was a woman in New York State who killed her husband and then fed him to the swine. I made every effort to get his nativity. It would have made a horoscope of the greatest interest. There must have been a conjunction of evil planets in the twelfth house, which rules both enemies and four-footed beasts."

The Professor went on to explain the planetary

influences which, with the co-operation of the jury, brought about the hanging of the unnatural wife, and Mrs. Dale considered the second couplet of a tragic poem, the first of which had come by inspiration:

> "Mother, the swine are at the door!
> Mother, will father come no more?"

When Myra, declaring that she was not hungry, went out and sat upon the kitchen step, she would have given much to have heard Mr. Ramsey tell of cranberry bogs and dams and sluices and good, honest muck. Her father's pitiless planets made her sick at heart, and the unreal world of her mother's fancy encompassed her with a horde of vapoury elementals moving in mockery of life. The thought of the children was a nightmare, and when she took from her pocket the silver cup it seemed as though she had received it in a dream, and waked to find it in her hand.

After this, when Myra reached the pit, if she did not find Aleck and Sis hiding in the bushes, the children were sure to appear as the shadows shortened. She set herself the task of civilising the

young savages; and, inspired by the new interest, went about its accomplishment with a zeal that sometimes resulted in their sudden flight. But, unable to resist the fascination of being objects of attention, they commonly returned, to lurk upon the edges of the clearing, and make known their presence by uncouth yells.

One morning, after several meetings had taken place, Myra's face wore an expression of unusual determination as she entered the forest, and beneath her arm she carried a bundle containing a copy of "Æsop's Fables," a towel, and a piece of yellow soap. She found Sis sitting placidly under a tree beside the pool, while the head of Aleck, protruding from a hole in the cabin roof, emitted sounds in imitation of an owl.

"How often have I told you not to shout?" she said, sternly, as she passed the hut. "Now go to work and clean out all this rubbish, so that you can have a house to play in. Try to see how tidy you can make it."

"How'n hell—" began the boy, but Myra interrupted, warningly.

"If you say such words I will not let you come

here any more; no, nor within a mile of anywhere I am."

Later there was a light refection, consisting of cookies, which had not turned out as well as had been hoped, and Aleck inscribed with charcoal upon a board as much of the alphabet as he could at the moment recall, which proved to be little. So the morning, marred only by a painful episode connected with the application of the yellow soap to hands and faces, ended pleasantly with the fable of "The Wolf and the Crane."

Myra was curious to see what impression the fancies of Æsop made upon the minds of her listeners, for, though they were received with close attention, the faces gave no hint of what was passing in their minds, neither was any comment made upon the text until Aleck interrupted suddenly to ask:

"Say, does critters talk?"

"Not really," explained Myra; "only in stories."

"Does hogs talk?"

"Sometimes—in books," Myra admitted, apprehensively.

"Wot does they say?"

"Oh, I don't remember," said Myra, puzzled for an answer. "People don't often write about pigs; they are such stupid animals—not intelligent like foxes and wolves."

"Arrah, yer kiddin'," persisted the boy, doggedly. "Yer knows what they says."

Myra, to put an end to the discussion, closed the book, and the boy relapsed into silence; but she was conscious that he watched her slyly, suspecting her of an intimate knowledge of the brute creation meanly withheld. After this she left Æsop at home, and related the story of Whittington and his cat from memory; but with one accord the children asked for a return to the "critters," preferring always fables she had read them before to new ones.

Once Myra and her companions took refuge in the hut from a shower, but owing to the condition of the roof it proved an indifferent shelter. The next morning she found Aleck hard at work to remedy the defect by skilfully weaving branches and twigs together, and filling the interstices with marl brought from the pool. In the operation the

boy displayed the intuitive ingenuity of a beaver. Gradually Myra's interest in the renovation became active, and on the second day she stood on the ground handing up materials for the work, while Sis ran among the trees collecting small, ineffectual armfuls of further supplies. When, upon some small mishap, the three for the first time laughed together, Myra felt the work of civilisation simplified. Too much of a child herself not to enjoy the play, if accounts were balanced it was far from certain that the missionary would not have been found the debtor for benefits received. She had not forgotten which trees marked the burial-place of the sauterne bottle, and sometimes in the night the restoration of the silver cup to its lawful owner occupied her thoughts; but at the pit the voices of the children had drowned the message of the pines.

The repairing of the cabin, and its interior decoration with Christmas-cards, supplements to the *Inglenook*, and other objects of art was not the work of one week or of two; and meanwhile, matters at the cranberry bog becoming less pressing, Mr. Ramsey came as of old to the cross-roads, bringing

gifts and tribute—"in case the butcher had gotten." Of these Myra kept strict account picture-writing on the end of the kitchen dres using the sign Taurus to indicate a steak, a Pisces to record the advent of a bass. To h mother she explained the hieroglyphics as M Ramsey's horoscope.

"Dear me!" cried Mrs. Dale. "What does i say?"

"It foretells," replied Myra, gravely, "that when the procession of the zodiac shall have reached the cusp of the lower shelf, an event of interest will undoubtedly take place in his life."

"Will it be for good or evil?"

"That," said the seer, "it is impossible at present to determine."

This conversation took place while Myra occupied her usual seat upon the kitchen step and her mother, at a table behind her, stirred something in a bowl with a large iron spoon. It formed part of a desultory dialogue covering a wide range of subjects, but there was a family tendency to introduce topics of moment when least expected, and Myra was not surprised to hear her mother say:

"I want to tell you something very important."

"Really, mother? How very delightful!"

"Well"—mysteriously—"this morning before you came in from your kindergarten, Mr. Ramsey had a long talk with your father."

"Indeed!" said Myra, indifferently, but blushing very red. "And what did Mr. Ramsey say?"

"How should I know?" demanded her mother. "The door of the workshop was shut, and I could not hear a word."

"Then what makes you think it was important?"

"Because"—conclusively—"they shook hands when they came out, just as if they had come to a conclusion about something."

"But I see nothing in father shaking hands with anyone whom he pleases," protested Myra. "How do we know it was not about the spring or the primeval remains? I don't consider it at all surprising."

"Perhaps you are right," assented Mrs. Dale, with aggravating readiness, "and I am wrong, and it was not what I thought."

"I am sure I can't see why one should think any-

thing at all," said Myra. "What are you mixing in that bowl?"

"General Sheridan's Favourite Flap-Jacks; but they ought to be cooked at once, and I have forgotten to make a fire."

Myra sprang up, and, hastily thrusting several handfuls of twigs and fat pine-chips into the stove, set the mass alight. "Keep on stirring, mother," she said, encouragingly. "It won't be a minute before the griddle is red-hot."

"Yes," replied her mother, sadly; "but I intended them for tea, and it is scarcely four o'clock."

"Never mind, we will have tea a little early; father never knows what time it is."

During the next five minutes mother and daughter gave undivided attention to the griddle. Then Mrs. Dale remarked:

"I wonder what kind of man you will marry, Myra?"

"He must be one," announced the daughter, "in whose judgment I have implicit faith; and as I could never respect the judgment of a person who wanted to marry me—" Leaving the sentence unfinished, she turned a cake.

CHAPTER SIX

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Dale, when she had revolved the proposition in her mind. "Then I don't see what you are going to do. I wonder if Sheridan really ate such queer-looking things?"

"The General was a brave man," said Myra. "Shall I call father?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER VII

IT was on the following morning, and at the breakfast-table, that Professor Dale surprised his family by announcing that he intended to visit Thebes. In the same breath he demanded a certain necktie of black satin whose very existence had become legendary.

"What time do you go?" inquired his wife, as though a trolley passed the door at frequent intervals.

"How are you going?" asked his daughter, more to the purpose.

"At nine o'clock, in Mr. Ramsey's buggy," he replied, answering both together.

An appointment with the owner of the buggy being evident, the others husbanded their questions, knowing that the number answered would in no case be great.

"But how will you come back? The horse cannot

make the trip twice in one day." Mrs. Dale looked for approval to her daughter, who nodded as though to say, "That was a good one."

"Of course I shall not return to-night," replied the Professor, annoyed at the folly of the question. "I shall put up at the Union House, and come back to-morrow."

"Indeed!" returned his wife. "And we shall be quite safe here, no doubt, with no one to protect us?"

"Do you consider Mr. Ramsey nobody?" asked the Professor, in an injured voice.

"Mr. Ramsey!" cried Mrs. Dale and her daughter in a breath.

"Certainly! I should not leave you unprotected, and he has kindly consented to pass the night here. The collapsible circus-seat will make an excellent bed. He assures me that several matters in this part of the property can occupy him profitably until I return with the buggy."

"What are you going to do in Thebes?" asked Mrs. Dale, in spite of cautionary signals from her daughter, who saw in the question the end of interrogatory. The Professor did not answer, but, continuing, said:

CHAPTER SEVEN

"You must be careful that Mr. Ramsey's repasts are punctual, as he is a man of methodical habits."

"It will be his own fault if they are a minute late," replied Myra, significantly, recalling their prospective guest's accomplishments.

"Quite right," her father assented, nodding his approval. "And, my child, it might be well to be a trifle more serious in speaking with Mr. Ramsey. He is a somewhat matter-of-fact person, and at times I fancy your—shall I say vivacity?—distresses him?"

"I shall not say a word to the little beast!" promised the vivacious one, heartily.

"That," remonstrated Professor Dale, "would be to err in the other direction. I am sure you will be courteous to our friend, to whom we owe so much."

"Father," Myra retorted, stoutly, "we are not under obligations to him; and if Mr. Ramsey were not as stupid as an owl he would make his company give you a large salary for living here."

"Oh, what an excellent idea!" cried Mrs. Dale. "I hope you will speak to him about it."

"That we shall see to when the proper time

comes," replied the Professor, to whom the thought had not occurred before.

"I am sure," continued Mrs. Dale, "the way you talked to that Swedish gentleman about cranberries was worth hundreds of dollars to the company."

"Mr. Ramsey tells me the projected colony has fallen through," remarked her husband. "I confess that at the time their representative did not appear to me sincere."

"Dear me!" sighed Mrs. Dale. "So he has reported unfavourably. One can never depend upon people who are too polite."

"But it would have been wrong to report the property as suitable if he did not think so," Myra protested. The colony had, in falling through, merely followed the natural law of projects, and presently the Professor said:

"I should like a few necessary articles packed."

"Of course," assented Mrs. Dale. "What in?"

"Where is my valise?"

"I think you cut that up to make washers for your force-pump. But would not the bread-canister do, with a shawl-strap around it?"

"Admirably," assented her husband; and during

the preparations for his comfort he improved the time with further instructions concerning the conduct of affairs during his absence, laying greatest stress on matters of which he was commonly least observant. When the appointed hour brought the buggy to the door he refused to consider the feelings of the pale horse, and, seizing the reins from Mr. Ramsey, immediately drove away.

"I will not urge a willing animal," he remarked, over his shoulder, "and, by taking his own gait, he can be resting and going at the same time. Do not forget to feed the chickens. I shall be back by nine to-morrow."

"Mr. Ramsey," said Mrs. Dale, as the three stood together watching the vanishing buggy, "did my husband mention to you why he wished to go to the village?"

"Why, not exactly," faltered the agent; "but I guess he had some purchases to make."

Which theory seemed to the Professor's relatives of all others the least probable.

"I happened to see some fancy canned-goods down at Shinn's I thought you might like to try," said Mr. Ramsey, after an interval, and Myra took

an early opportunity to inscribe the sign Scorpio upon the kitchen dresser as the nearest equivalent for preserved lobster.

"There weren't any letters," he was saying to her mother as she returned to the living-room—"just this package for Miss Myra." But, meeting the eye of the consignee, he added, quoting from the typewritten address of a small parcel in his hand, "Miss Myra Dale."

Myra tore away the wrappings expecting to uncover some such trifle as she occasionally received from former school friends; but within she found a box bearing the legend—

EGYPTIAN CIGARETTES

and the sub-title, "Beau Sexe," together with characters of the language of Mahomet.

"Hello!" cried Mr. Ramsey, jocularly, supposing himself safely wide of truth. "So you've taken to cigarettes?"

"What a nice little box!" remarked Mrs. Dale. "What do you suppose is in it?"

"Just what Mr. Ramsey has so cleverly guessed," returned Myra, examining her property.

"Oh, I was only fooling!" said the little agent. "Of course I don't——"

"Of course not," interrupted Myra, intuitively pulling a small pink string. The box opened, disclosing a layer of dainty cylinders imbedded in paper lace, each bearing the monogram, "M. D."

"They must be candy!" speculated Mrs. Dale. "Who could have sent them?"

Saying nothing, Myra took a match from a china elephant, who upheld his huddah full. Her eyes were bright, her head thrown back almost defiantly, and presently Pineopolis experienced its first scandal.

"How can you?" cried her mother, shocked beyond expression.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Mr. Ramsey, nervous but loyal.

"Throw it away this instant!" commanded Mrs. Dale.

But Myra, sitting on the trunk, puffed cautiously, for she felt her reputation for depravity at stake. She wondered if Mr. Ramsey would appreciate a ring should she be able to achieve one, and hoped that he was shocked. She speculated as to

how long it would take her mother to forget the incident; but, as an aromatic fragrance filled the room, she noticed that the nostrils of that lady dilated, and took heart.

"Myra," said Mrs. Dale, "I did not think that I should live to see a daughter of mine guilty of such an action."

"Why, mother," exclaimed the daughter, in surprise, flicking the ashes upon the floor. "Do you really consider it bad form? Mr. Ramsey, you don't think so?"

"Well," stammered the agent, "it does look kind of odd if you're not used to seeing ladies smoke. But then, I can't see any special harm in it —that is, if you like it."

"There, mother, you hear what Mr. Ramsey says, and he speaks as a man of the world."

"I consider it both vulgar and wicked," rejoined her mother, warmly; but it was plain that her first flood of indignation ebbed.

"I can't believe," went on Myra, between puffs, "that if it were vulgar the Queen of England would smoke, or that if it were wicked Bishop Potter would recommend it as a substitute for tea."

"Doesn't it make you sick?" demanded Mrs. Dale, severe but curious.

"Oh, not in the least. You have no idea how soothing I find it. It has such an effect upon the brain; thought seems to come without an effort. One cannot wonder that so many women writers resort to cigarettes for inspiration."

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Dale, regarding the transgressor with increasing interest.

"My father had an old aunt who smoked a pipe," remarked Mr. Ramsey; but seeing that his kinswoman was not accepted as an authority, he regretted having mentioned the circumstance.

"Just take a little puff!" cried Myra, crossing to her mother and extending the attractive mouthpiece.

"Me?" cried Mrs. Dale. "Never!"

"Only one, to see for yourself how nice it is."

"I am perfectly sure it would make me ill," with fatal deliberation.

"Oh, do you think so? Look at me!"

Then, being tempted, the author of many maxims fell, and with the fall came retribution swift and sure, made manifest in a fit of choking, which sent the agent bounding into the kitchen for water.

"You've killed me!" gasped the sufferer. "You've killed your mother!"

"Oh, no, I haven't," said her daughter, reassuringly; "but you should never swallow the smoke."

Mrs. Dale coughed again, and wiped her eyes.

"I am sure I deserved nothing less," she said. "And what can Mr. Ramsey think of us?"

"Candidly, Mr. Ramsey," said Myra, sweetly, "What do you think?"

"If you was my daughter," answered Mr. Ramsey, "I'd shake you good, danged if I wouldn't."

Though Mr. Ramsey's speech was frank to incivility Myra had never been so near respecting the little man before.

"You'll do better next time, mother," she suggested.

"There won't be any next time for me—nor for you, if I ever get hold of that box," asserted Mrs. Dale, with conviction.

Throughout the scene Myra's heart had throbbed with foolish exultation. Not because the only person who could have sent her cigarettes had not forgotten her, but because remembering he had chosen this reminder. They would not meet again, now

that the colony had been given up; but somewhere in a noisy counting-house, amid the click of typewriters, he had heard again the calling of the pines. It was not long, of course, to be remembered —three weeks exactly, to a day—but for the first time in her life she realised her right to remembrance, and this for qualities which, though not on every list of graces, she valued in herself.

But the agent of Pineopolis was not a man to pass the hours of daylight in social relaxation, and, much as he esteemed the ladies Dale, he found their society at times a trifle disconcerting.

"I've got a heap to do," he said, slapping his soft felt hat upon his knee. "The first thing, I must hunt up a fellow who has a sort of squatter's right to a clearing somewhere hereabouts. I hear he has been cutting timber on our land."

"There is no one near here," Mrs. Dale rejoined, "except two children Myra found running in the woods, and they are too small to cut trees."

"Does the man you want to find keep pigs?" inquired Myra.

"Yes; he's the fellow, and a pretty tough one, too, I guess—regular pinelander. You don't happen to know which way he lives?"

"No, not exactly, but I feel sure I could find the road."

"If you could put me on the track it would save me a lot of walking."

"May I go with you?"

"You!" cried Mr. Ramsey, brightening. "Why, certainly; but, from all accounts, the place is anything but a flower-garden. Perhaps you wouldn't mind letting me go on ahead when we get near the house. It won't take me long to find out all I want to know."

"But I wish particularly to see the house," protested Myra. "Wait just a minute till I get my sun-bonnet."

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER VIII

A BRISK wind blowing from the north brought to the pines a breath of fall. The sky, seen through occasional openings overhead, was blue as lapis-lazuli, and where the shafts of sunlight lay the dry brown needles seemed to burn. It was a morning when the new blood tingles in the veins, when the dancing soul laughs at the plodding body, and the body runs to overtake the soul.

Mr. Ramsey had never found his companion less disconcerting, nor her sympathy so ready. When he told her of the cranberry bog she listened, and expressed regret that certain cuttings had refused to root. She laughed so gaily at his jokes—and even when there were no jokes to laugh at—that he dismissed the memory of a note indorsed the day before, which document was not without its bearing on the visit of Professor Dale to Thebes. Even the

fatal days of grace, so-called, grew distant as the judgment that men dread and disregard.

To him, if he were asked, the wind meant only that the weather would be cold; but all unconsciously he, too, joined in the mighty symphony, keeping time with clumsy fingers upon his humble, home-made instrument, raising a feeble voice to swell the harmony. And the burden of his song was poor and mean or grand and beautiful as the ear that should hear might find it—dollars and cents! So many here, so many there; add, divide, subtract, and the balance will be for her!—For her! for her! for her! It is a chorus that the wind has known since the gates of Eden closed. Dollars and cents, or honour and life!—and a balance for her!

But if Mr. Ramsey heard no music, to Myra the windy pines seemed like a military band playing a quick-step for the marching universe. She could hear the brasses and the trumpets and the drums, and, through the swing of stately melody, a sharp staccato measure breaking in—fantastic, purposeless, but not discordant—

"To me and you
When skies are blue. . . ."

"Hello!" cried Mr. Ramsey, when they came to the pit. "I must have that cabin pulled down, or some squatter will be taking possession of it."

"I am afraid that has already happened," said Myra, laughing. "I use it for a play-house."

"Oh! then, of course——"

"Yes; it is my play-house, and here are my dolls. Come here, Aleck; come here, Sis."

It required persuasion to reconcile the children to Mr. Ramsey's presence, especially as that gentleman, on his part, made few advances, and still more to enlist their services as guides.

"But we want to see dad; we must see him at once."

"All right," muttered Aleck, sullenly. "Come on; but I'm a-goin' to catch hell."

As they went on again Sis walked close to Myra, holding her hand, and Mr. Ramsey suggested:

"I wouldn't touch that kid if I was you; you don't know how low down these pinelanders are."

"Oh, we are old friends; are we not, Sis? Come, speak up!"

"Yes," said Sis, boldly.

"Yes, what?" demanded the girl.

"Yes, Myradale," repeated Sis, as though it were a name of three syllables.

"Say, you don't let her call you that?" exclaimed Mr. Ramsey, in dismay.

"It is the only name I have," she answered.

"This way, Myradale!" called Aleck, who was far ahead.

"I swan, I wouldn't have it!" protested the agent.

"Sis, where is your ribbon?" asked Myra, suddenly.

"Mam swiped it," replied the innocent.

"Lord, but they are low down!" commented Mr. Ramsey.

"You should not say that," cried Myra, indignantly. "It is not fair. Sis is a good, gentle little girl, poor child, but no one has ever taken any care of her. She is clever, too. Sis, spell cat."

"C-a-t, cat; b-a-t, bat; r-a-t, rat," piped the child, obediently.

When it was plain that Mr. Ramsey was not much impressed by Sis's accomplishments the company proceeded in silence for several minutes, till presently a low sound became audible, which seemed

to rise from the ground, and Aleck, who had waited for the others to come up, intimated that a guide was no longer needed.

"I think we had better leave the children here," said Myra, interpreting. "They seem to be afraid that their father will be angry at their showing us the way, and they are foolishly timid about the pigs."

"They're over yon," put in the boy, pointing. "If yer scairt, yer can go round; but they won't hurt yer if yer stand up—only if yer lay down."

"I'll take your word for that," said Mr. Ramsey.

"I don't think I've ever seen a full-grown pine-lander," remarked Myra, when they had parted from the children. "What are they like?"

"Well, they say," replied the agent, laughing, "that all of them are more than half-crazy. I suppose it's living by themselves so much and not seeing anyone from the outside for months together."

"But how do they manage to exist at all? What do they live on?"

"Oh, they are mostly timber thieves and charcoal burners on the sly. Some of them raise a little

corn, or maybe pigs, where there are acorns, an some of them make apple-jack unknown to the in spectors. There used to be counterfeiters in th woods years ago, but there isn't any of that nov All the same, most of them are up to somethin crooked."

"That is not surprising when you think how du life is for them. The temptation must be irr sistible." After a moment she added, reflectively "I am sure the world would never have been s wicked as it is if Cain had been allowed to remai with the family."

"Cain?" exclaimed Mr. Ramsey, in surprise.

"Yes; you remember they put him off by hin self in Nod, with nobody to speak to but Satan, an nothing to do but to invent sins and plans to annc the good people."

"But," protested Mr. Ramsey, who was nothin if not orthodox, "Cain was real low down b nature."

"We can't be sure of that. Of course, he shou have had more self-control when Abel aggravate him, but he didn't know then how easy it is to ki people," Myra suggested, rashly.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Somehow," said Mr. Ramsey, "you folks seem to have got hold of a different kind of Bible from any I ever read. I guess that must be the pigs."

The low sound, for some time vaguely audible above the murmur of the trees, now grew louder and easily recognisable as the disputing of swine over fodder. Although the herd was evidently a large one, the homely barn-yard suggestion was anything but terrifying.

Soon other signs of habitation appeared, and the visitors made several detours to avoid unattractive heaps of rubbish. Once, in crossing a glade where the sand lay bared of its accustomed covering of needles, Myra's foot struck an obstacle which proved to be a large bone. Investigation discovered others scattered under the trees, and among them a bigger object, identified by Mr. Ramsey as the skull of a horse.

"How do you suppose it came here?" the girl asked, recalling unpleasantly Aleck's repeated references to horses.

"The pigs must have brought it," the agent answered. "They are great at digging up anything that's buried."

"But they don't go about loose, do they?" demanded Myra, slackening her pace.

"Oh, I guess they do; but we won't have to see them," he answered, reassuringly. "There is the clearing off to the right, and the roof of a house."

But scarcely had he spoken when a turn in the road brought them suddenly upon the herd, numbering two-score or more, gathered in a narrow amphitheatre so compactly that the rounded backs —black, white, and mottled—pressed close together as eggs in a basket. From a rough waggon, such as farmer's use for hay, a man stood looking down upon the pigs, who in their turn regarded him with blood-shot, supplicating eyes, their heads erect, their great, palpitating snouts silent for the moment with greedy expectation. He was a small, wiry man, with a matted shock of sun-bleached hair and a ragged tuft of beard. His upper lip, shaven in some strange conceit, and protruding like the lip of an ape, moved as he faced his swine in malignant grimaces. From time to time he made with his arms the movement of throwing something from him, which, to his evident amusement, deceived the less sagacious of the pigs into violent agitation.

CHAPTER EIGHT

At first sight there was nothing repellent in the scene, and, held by curiosity, Myra and the agent watched from a distance, as explorers who happen unobserved upon some aboriginal rite. But presently, when the man, taking up a broad-axe, began vigorously to hew some object hidden in the waggon, the herd broke into mad confusion. As he worked he appeared to detach fragments, which he hurled to left and right among the pigs, and for which they fought and struggled with a wolfish fury, the larger throwing the weight of their great bodies against the smaller, the strong attacking the weak with savage tusks. Sometimes in the battle several would go down together, and lie for an instant, heaped like bloated carrion on a battle-field; sometimes one, rising above the rest, would stand erect in the likeness of a naked, misshapen man, beating the air with short, impotent arms; and all the while the pines resounded with the tumult of their strife, rage, avarice, cowardice, the lust of the belly.

"Oh, let us go away as quickly as we can!" cried Myra, grasping Mr. Ramsey's arm.

"Hold on a second," said the agent, now alert

and watchful. "There's something here that will bear looking into." But the wind, which had been with them, falling just then, they both drew back, well-nigh overpowered by a sickening stench. When, hurrying through the pines, they had come to where the air was pure again, and only distant sounds of conflict recalled what they had seen, he said:

"I guess we've had enough pinelander for one day. I guess we had better put for home as fast as we can toddle. I might have known that it wouldn't do for you to come."

"I am not afraid," she answered. "It was disagreeable, but I'm not at all upset. Tell me what it was that he was doing."

"I guess he was feeding something to his swine that the law don't allow—that's all."

"He seemed to be throwing them meat. Was that possible?"

"I'll tell you when we get home—not here."

"But I am not going home yet," she answered firmly. "That was the man the children call 'dad,' I am sure, and I want to see the woman they call 'mam.' It is not curiosity, I assure you, Mr. Ram-

sey; but I must know about these people for the sake of their children. I must go to their house and speak to them."

"Please don't do that," he urged. "Let us go home now, and when I come here another day, I promise you I'll tell you all about it."

"Tell me what you know now, and take me to the house. I'm not afraid. I'm not like other girls," she answered, half beseeching, half imperious.

"Now, look here," the agent rejoined, confronting her; "if you must know, it's clear to me that this fellow is hiding down here so that he can fatten his pigs on dead animals. What we saw is enough to send him to the penitentiary, and it won't be my fault if it don't. His house is no place for you, and his kids are no company for you. He'll go to jail, and they'll go to the poorhouse; and what kind of a man would I be to let you mix up in it?"

"What kind of a man would you be to let me go alone?" Myra retorted, tossing her head, and making straight for the open, while Mr. Ramsey, not being the kind of man to dissuade her from her purpose, followed the next best course, and walked beside her, still protesting.

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER IX

THE home of the pig-man stood in the midst of a clearing which one familiar with the pines would have recognised as the site of an abandoned lumber-camp. The house, a former saw-mill, had been built of slabs and cullings, but so long ago that the young oaks now grew high above the roof, while on every hand straggling saplings, scant of foliage and bare of lower branches, stood huddled in lean clusters or spread in uninviting groves. The building, never more than a rough shelter for machinery, had settled and warped and disintegrated, till the leaning walls were only held erect by props and stays at every angle; and the roof, patched here and there with rusty tin and scraps of black tarred paper, seemed about to fall.

On the edge of the forest Mr. Ramsey gave a final word of caution.

"Of course, it won't do to let on that we suspect anything, so I'll just make out that I want to buy a pig."

"Very well," Myra assented. "But do let us say that we prefer a small one."

"Oh, I don't mean to take it really," he explained.

"Of course not; but we might have to look at it."

The house nowhere gave any of the thousand tokens which mark the living dwelling from the dead, deserted shell—a milk-pan in the sun, a handkerchief upon a hedge, a flower, a cat—these tell that the heart of a house is beating, that the soul of a house is on her throne; but about the home of the pig-man was only sand, trodden and furrowed by swine; its corners were polished by the itching sides of pigs, and its door-yard full of ugly hollows, moulded to the shape of bloated bodies. As the back, so was the front; but here a door stood open, and upon the threshold a woman sat, huddled, impassive and blinking, as a toad in the sun. She did not look toward the strangers, but, like a toad, she watched their coming from the corner of her eye, and, as in recognition of their presence, drew her

bare feet beneath the ragged hem of a grimy cotton wrapper. By an almost imperceptible movement of the head she resented the intrusion, and, to accentuate the resentment, spat.

"You see how terribly low down they are?" whispered Mr. Ramsey to Myra, instinctively stretching his arm across the path to detain her. "Don't you think, after all, it would be better to go back?"

But Myra had not passed the ordeal of dad to shrink from mam, and as he hesitated she advanced. She received no greeting, and did not expect one, for in the silent, sullen woman she recognised a long familiar type. Going directly to the open door she looked over the stooped head into the house, and shortly, but not uncivilly, demanded:

"Where is the boss?"

"He ain't in there," growled the pig-woman, sullenly, without taking the trouble to move her lips. "I don't know where he is."

"We want to see him about something," Myra persisted, to provoke discussion.

"Well, you'd better look for him," returned the woman; but, being a daughter of Eve, she added:

"What do you want to see him about?"

"About buying a pig."

"Well, I guess he'll sell you one"—this with a scarcely perceptible decrease of animosity—"I guess likely he's got one to suit you. Go down to the barn and holler; he ain't far off."

"Perhaps I had better wait here while you look for him," suggested Myra to Mr. Ramsey, at the same time signalling her wish to be alone with the woman.

The low group of sheds and outhouses was not far distant, and the agent, moving toward them, said: "I sha'n't be long; I sha'n't go out of sight."

"Is that your gentleman friend?" the woman inquired, following him with her eyes.

"No," replied Myra, shortly, but without perceptible resentment.

"You don't fool me," returned the woman, chuckling. "I know the signs too well. I had friends myself in my day—plenty of them—and little good it was they done me."

"I wish you would let me have a chair," said Myra, meeting the insolent eyes unmoved. "I am tired."

CHAPTER NINE

The woman, reaching into the house, drew forth a wooden chair.

"I thought maybe you held yourself too good to sit down," she sniffed, half apologetically.

"Well, I'm too tired to stand up. I've come nearly two miles," returned Myra, pressing the chair's legs into the sand to insure stability. "It's a lovely day, isn't it?" But the remark meeting with no response, she composed herself to silent observation.

Though the pig-woman could not have passed her thirtieth year her face was drawn and bloodless as the face of one much older, and about her mouth were hard, unmistakable lines telling of worse than bodily decay. Want and work had left their impress upon the hollow cheeks, and suffering —suffering that had ranged the wide, waste places beyond the walls of pain—looked from the wandering, foolish eyes; but the story of the lips was the story of abominations, and the lines about them were the scars of friendships that had done her little good. Her hair was black as ink, save where, upon one side, a dash of white lay, startling as the contrast of a magpie's wing. There was dust in

the hair and a smudge of soot across her chin, but upon her forehead this slattern, this drudge among pariahs, preserved one symbol of her sex—a row of curl-papers, inconsequent as flags upon a sunken ship.

As Myra noted these things she feigned an interest in the house, and presently the woman, whose eyes had not been idle, broke out:

"When you get through staring, maybe you'll tell us what you think of it. Pretty little cottage, ain't it? Sorter Gawthic!"

"Oh, it is much the same as ours," said Myra; "only ours is newer."

"Whereabouts do you live?"

"Over that way," nodding toward Pineopolis.

"New place on the road to Thebes?"

"Yes, at the cross-roads; we have not been there very long."

The pig-woman favoured her visitor with a scrutiny that took in every detail of sun-bonnet, shoes, and cotton dress.

"Aren't them sleeves bigger than they're wearing now?" she asked.

"Oh, no; I think not," said the other. "I made

them from a pattern in a paper that we take. It's a splendid paper for hints, and I'll be glad to lend it to you, if you like."

It did not appear in the speaker's voice that there might be lack of sympathy between the *Inglenook* and the pig-woman, and the offer, though not accepted, was not ill-received. A look of cunning crept into the woman's face, reminding Myra painfully of Sis, at Sis's worst.

"I did think I might be after getting me a velvet jacket if I had a chance," was the preposterous remark. But the bravado of the pig-woman was too weak to be despised.

"Velvet catches so much dust," suggested Myra. "I should think cloth would be better."

The woman gave a toad-like wink.

"It's likely I'll have either," she answered, with a dreary laugh. "This get-up would look stylish with a jacket, wouldn't it, now?"

"It would look better for being washed," said Myra, boldly.

"Ah, what's the difference?" cried the woman, tucking the tattered skirt about her knees. "What's the difference if it would? A rag is a

rag, clean or dirty. You mightn't think it, but I used to be particular what I had on. I threw away a petticoat once because it had an iron-mark on it —a petticoat that cost me six dollars."

"What a pity!"

"I didn't mind then; I had plenty more." Then, after a break, "How many pairs of shoes have you?".

"One good pair," was the truthful answer.

"Pshaw!" cried the other. "Once I had more shoes than I could count."

"It must be getting late," said Myra, with a nervous glance toward the barn. It came to her instinctively that this multitude of shoes symbolised something beyond her understanding, beyond her desire to understand, and she would have obeyed her impulse to call Mr. Ramsey had not a new expression in the woman's eyes deterred her. Bold eyes they were, and in them now defiance mingled with contempt. "You are a coward," they seemed to say. "You are afraid of truth when she is dirty. You are a miserable coward like the rest." Myra, who had started forward, leaned back against the broken chair, meeting the woman's look unflinchingly.

"That was before your marriage, I suppose—before you came to the pines?" she said.

Mam put the back of a red hand across her mouth to control a burst of vulgar merriment.

"You're right, my dear," she tittered. "I wasn't married then," and, in feigned surprise, she added: "I thought you was going home."

"No; I want to hear more about your clothes."

"Clothes?" sniffed the pig-woman. "I had clothes to burn. I was a dandy dresser then. You think yourself good-looking, but I tell you, you couldn't have done business on the same block with me. Money! *that* for it! And clothes! I tell you I had clothes to burn. I had a plush suit that cost a hundred—cardinal plush, trimmed with gold braid, and fur five inches deep around the hem; and a hat to match. You could see me a mile off—you couldn't lose me! And I had red silk stockings. Holy saints!"

She broke off suddenly, caught by some killing pain of memory, perhaps, or perhaps an image of her own young self rose up to mock her through the swine-polluted air. So might that other, in a famine-stricken land, have bragged as he gnawed

his husks, babbling of rich attire and hired servants, had no eyes watched for him a great way off.

For a time the woman did not speak again, but sat with hard eyes looking straight before her into the forest. When presently she swore beneath her breath and spat, Myra turned furtively to make sure that Mr. Ramsey was still in sight.

The agent stood beside the barn, in conversation with the owner of the herd, who leaned across a broken gate to point out some object—presumably a pig—within a small inclosure. The sight brought reassurance, and Myra abruptly forced a change in her companion's thoughts.

"You have two children, haven't you?" she asked.

"Maybe I have and maybe I haven't," replied the woman, with her old stolidity, adding, with a significant nod: "If I have, they are nothing to you, and you want to leave them alone."

"Why, what do you mean? I wouldn't harm your children."

"You want to leave them alone, do you hear me?"

"But I like them. I want to do them all the good I can," persisted Myra.

"*He* won't have it. You want to leave them alone," the woman repeated, doggedly.

"Does their father object to my teaching them?" demanded Myra, alert to advance the object of her visit.

"I tell you he won't have it," said mam again.

"But he can't want them to grow up without knowing how to read," insisted Myra. "Just think what a disadvantage that would be to them all through their lives."

"Little he cares for that."

"But you care, don't you?"

Her chin upon her hand, the pig-woman regarded her visitor imperturbably. After a moment she announced, with charming frankness:

"You make me tired."

Which idiom, though never flattering, Myra welcomed as a distinct advance toward mutual unreserve.

"Why?" she demanded, smiling, in spite of herself.

"Because," explained the pig-woman, dispassionately, and speaking for the first time in her natural voice, which was soft and Celtic—"because

you want to poke your nose into other folk's affairs, and keep it there as long as it amuses you. But—small blame to you—you'd be quick enough to pull it out if there was trouble."

"You are very much mistaken," Myra answered, flushing. "I have no wish to interfere in your affairs. I only thought, being so far from any school, you would rather have your children learn to read and write than grow up little savages." She checked herself, conscious of an irritation that might defeat her cause. But the woman only laughed.

"That hair of yours ain't red for nothing," she remarked; and added, with an evident intent toward conciliation, "I'll bet there's lots of young fellows that has found that out."

"I had rather talk of your children than myself," responded Myra.

The woman shrugged her stooping shoulders.

"Lord! I ain't seen anyone in so long I've most forgotten how to talk," she said; and, prompted by an intercepted glance toward the barn, added: "You ain't afraid of him already, are you?"

"No," answered Myra. "I am not afraid of anyone in the world."

"That's right"—with an approving nod—"I used to be like that myself."

"I want to speak especially of your little girl," persisted Myra. "She cannot remain here always. Some day she will go out among people and grow up a good woman, and marry and have children of her own. She is so pretty, and so smart."

For a moment the pig-woman's dull eyes grew bright with pride of motherhood.

"Sis ain't got no call to be a fool," she said, tossing her frowsy head, with its curl-papers and white streak.

"And you will let the children come to see me?" Myra pursued her advantage.

"If they've a mind to, I won't bother stopping them," the woman assented, graciously enough; and, as though struck by her own complaisance, she went on:

"Say, when you come round the corner of the house just now I would have swatted you with a brick, if I'd had one handy. Funny, ain't it?"

If Myra found the circumstance amusing, she had no chance to say so, for at that moment the voice of Mr. Ramsey was heard to sound a note of warning.

"Look out, Miss Dale!" he called, but without great alarm; and with his came another voice, in timbre that of the *Devil* in the tragedy of "Mr. Punch."

"Head him off, you fool! You blank fool, head him off!"

Close upon the outcry came the occasion of it, running rapidly toward the woman—in shape a small black pig, which had in some way escaped from the litter. At sight of him the pig-woman sprang to her feet; but the movement only caused the wily animal to swerve from his course, and disappear beneath the house. As she stood with her ragged garments clinging to her the woman looked an Amazon of strength; but when the angry, crooked little man came panting up the slight ascent, she shrank back, cowering before him.

"What in Gehenna did you let him get in there for?" croaked the pig-man, pushing her aside so roughly that she caught at the back of Myra's chair to keep from falling. Recovering herself, she called after him a curse that sent the blood to the girl's cheeks. At this the man turned with a volley of abuse, to which she might have answered,

giving like for like, had not the agent stepped between them.

"It's none of my affair," said Mr. Ramsey, quietly, as he faced the man, "and if your wife is fool enough to put up with it, it's her lookout; but you've got to let up on that kind of talk when there's decent folks about."

"Who says so?" demanded the pig-man, and his bristling hair appeared to rise on end.

"I say so," replied the other.

"You? You'll stop me, will you?"

"I might have a try at it," returned Mr. Ramsey, undismayed, while Myra, to her own surprise, felt her blood tingle with partisan excitement. From the stand-point of a looker-on, it was evident that the pigman would stop short of personal encounter.

"Ah, gwan; who's talking to you?" he muttered, sullenly.

"All we want is civility, and not much of that," announced the agent, finding a phrase to fit the occasion in his stock. For principle—and Myra—he was ready to give battle; but Mr. Ramsey was a man of peace. Seeing that the incident was

closed, he asked, reverting to the matter in hand:

"How much did you say that black fellow was worth?"

"Ten cents," growled the man, wounded honour yielding reluctant precedence to thrift.

"Ten cents!" cried the agent, in amazement. "Ten cents for a whole live pig?"

At this the man burst into a hoarse, derisive laugh, in which the woman joined shrilly; and Myra, as she glanced from one to the other, observed that neither had just cause for vanity in the matter of teeth.

"I guess you've bought pigs afore!" snorted the man, with mocking irony. "I reckon you're an old hand at the business."

"Arrah, what's the difference?" cried the woman, spitting. "Tell him it's by the pound you mean."

"Oh!" said Mr. Ramsey, with embarrassment. "I thought that was pretty cheap. Is he old enough to—to take care of himself?"

"You want to raise him, do you?" scoffed the man. "Well, all you've got to do is to bring him back at meal-times for a week or two." He laughed

again at his own humour, and added nursery details, looking impertinently at Myra, who turned her back upon him.

From her first sight of the man she had abandoned any thought of an appeal to him, and now her one wish was to bring the visit to an end. If for a moment she had fancied herself strong enough to lift her sister by the wayside, beaten of thieves, and passed by priest and Levite, that hope had vanished when, following close upon the blow, the two had laughed at Mr. Ramsey's ignorance of pigs.

"Come! it must be growing late," she said to the agent, and his presence made her bold to add an invitation to her hostess.

"You must return my visit, for neighbours should be sociable, you know."

The woman laughed.

"I guess you know as much about pinelanders as your feller does about sucking-pigs." The man had disappeared beneath the house in pursuit of the deserter.

At the edge of the forest the visitors, hearing steps behind them, turned, to see the pig-woman

shuffling clumsily to overtake them in a pair of large man's shoes.

"Hold on, you have dropped something!" she called; but, with a wink, explained "that's just a blind—I thought he might be looking. Here, you, young man, go on a piece." The last to Mr. Ramsey, who most reluctantly obeyed. When he was out of hearing, she began:

"See here, do you want that young one?"

"Why, I think not to-day," Myra faltered. "It's too young."

"Pshaw!" returned the woman. "I don't mean the pig; I mean the kid—Sis. Supposin' I had to get out of here, would you see she was put somewhere she might have a chance to grow up like you said?"

The mother's face was drawn and anxious. In a moment she had grown older—old enough to have parted company with her own pitiful youth, old enough for second innocence.

"Yes," Myra answered, as she would have answered had the appeal demanded greater sacrifice; "we will do the best we can for your little girl at any time. But, you know, we are not rich——"

"Oh, that's all right," the woman assured her.

"You're poor enough, or you wouldn't be in the pines; but you ain't low down like me. They wouldn't set the dog on you if you was to show your face in the yard. They wouldn't lock the barn so you couldn't get in out of the wet. They wouldn't damn you, body and soul, for being a woman instead of the worst hobo that ever took the road."

"You mustn't say such things," protested Myra, gently. "Nobody would treat you so. I will find a home for Sis, indeed I will; and I am sure there are many others who would be glad to help, too."

"Never mind the others," said the pig-woman, desperately. "I've heard about them others before. You're my last chance, and what I want to know is, will you or won't you?"

"I will be a friend to your little girl in every way I can," said Myra, solemnly.

"That'll do; that's all I want," the woman announced. "Maybe the time won't come at all and maybe it'll be here sooner than you think. Look if you see him coming."

"No; there is no one coming," Myra answered, adding, hurriedly: "I must go now, but I will come to see you again."

"Don't you do it," returned the woman, prompt-

ly. "I don't want any midnight mission busines
I done all the harm I could, and I only let up whe
my time was over. There ain't no use pretendin
I wouldn't do it all again, for I would—more fo
me—but it ain't fair for the kid to start in whe
I finish. There's no use making plans—mayl
there's a God about somewhere. He ain't been mu
where I've lived, but I've come across his trac
more'n once, and He's liable to run things to su
Himself."

"Why do you only speak of Sis?" asked Myr
"Surely you ought to think of Aleck, too?"

"Oh, he ain't mine," the woman answered, to
ing her head. "He ain't mine, and Sis ain't *h*
Besides, a boy can hustle—a boy's got a sho
He'd clear out in an hour if Sis was gone."

"And you would be left alone with that
that—" Myra paused for want of a word fitti
yet discreet; and the pig-man's consort laughed
her hesitation, as she said:

"Say it or think it; it's all one to me. I'd n
stop long with Sis away."

"Where would you go?"

"Sure," replied the pig-woman, slyly, "ther
more men than women in the pines."

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER X

PROFESSOR DALE did not return at nine o'clock. In truth, the shadows of the pines fell far to eastward across the clearing before his watching daughter caught the first glimpse of the buggy down the long vista of the road from Thebes; and then it was much too late for Mr. Ramsey to meet his appointments in the village.

"It must be father," Myra speculated. "But there is something sticking up like the smoke-stack of a locomotive. I wonder if he could have made an automobile?"

"Lord!" ejaculated Mr. Ramsey, anxiously. "Don't you see any horse?"

"Oh, yes; his white mane is bobbing up and down, but the other is the strangest thing I ever saw."

"Perhaps it is some sort of auxiliary power," suggested Mrs. Dale.

"Then I wish he would put it on," rejoined th agent. "I might catch one man yet."

But the Professor did not hurry, and minut passed before the watchers could distinguish th he sat behind a giant cone of shining metal, wit an arm on either side. Occasionally his head ap peared, observant of the horse; but, for the mo part, he seemed to leave the burden of respons bility upon the shoulders of that sagacious beas He did not attempt to steer the buggy through th stumps, but, halting in the track, called out in visibly:

"Someone come here and lift this out, and plea be very careful."

The cone, which proved to be of tin, was ligh in weight, and required only skill on Mr. Ramsey part to reach the ground in safety. Once there, rose above the agent's head, and its diameter mu have caused inconvenience to anyone undertakin to drive astride of it for eight miles.

"If I am a trifle late," observed the Professo sinking back upon the seat, "it is the fault Bickle. He contracted to finish his work befo eleven; and, although at noon it was still incomplet

he went to dinner, and remained an hour. It has taken me two hours to make the journey, and I fear my legs are permanently disabled."

"Perhaps a little walk would limber them up," suggested Mr. Ramsey, looking at his watch.

"I shall not be able to walk for several days," answered the Professor. "When I have rested ten or fifteen minutes, I fancy a hot foot-bath may be beneficial."

"But you cannot take a bath in the middle of the road," protested his wife; and Myra added:

"I think Mr. Ramsey is anxious to get back to town."

"We must insist upon Mr. Ramsey's remaining to supper," said her father, rubbing the inner sinews of his thigh with great deliberation. "Myra, be careful not to upset the vibraphone."

"So that's a vibraphone!" said Mr. Ramsey. "What does it do?"

"When I have adjusted it to record the vibration of wind among the pine-trees," replied the scientist, "it will, I hope, enable us to detect atmospheric changes hitherto unnoted."

"Are you not afraid it may be injured by the

damp?" suggested Myra. "I am sure Mr. Ramsey will help us take it to the workshop, if you will show us where it is to stand."

"Presently, my child, presently," replied the Professor, putting a cautious foot beyond the buggy, and, when the agent sprang to help him, at once drawing it back.

"Are all these bundles yours?" asked Mrs. Dale, the first to discover that the body of the vehicle was replete with packages.

"Yes," said the Professor; "a few needed articles."

"Dear me!" cried Mrs. Dale, with excitement. "What are they?"

"Presently, my dear, presently," replied the Professor, bending to massage his calves. In this he found himself encumbered by a particularly corpulent package, which, to dispose of, he handed to his daughter, saying:

"A dress for you, Myra."

"For me, father? Oh, thank you."

"Why not get out," suggested Mrs. Dale, "and let us attend to the bundles?"

"Presently, my dear," replied the Professor; "presently."

"Perhaps," ventured Mr. Ramsey, "it would be easier to take the things out from behind." And, adopting the suggestion, the three began forthwith to jetsam cargo, till the chips were hidden beneath an assortment that would have done credit to a juggler's hat—two hams, a roll of oil-cloth, a can of kerosene, another of varnish, one box of ginger-snaps, eight packages of possibilities, two of mysteries, three of dubiousnesses, a bunch of bananas, naked and not ashamed, and, finally, a chromo-lithograph of a steamer entering the port of Havre.

"That last was a present from the agent of the line," explained the Professor, nursing his knees.

"I should hope so," said his wife, with feeling.

"Mr. Ramsey, I am going to ask you a question, and I want you to answer truthfully," said Myra, a few minutes later. "Have you lent father any money?"

She stood at the horse's head, administering sugar and regarding, as she spoke, a small, unsatisfactory daguerreotype of herself in his sagacious eye. The Professor had gone limping to the house, and there, also, was Mrs. Dale, heating water for

the bath. Mr. Ramsey, having shaken out the lap-robe, was folding it again.

"Why, whatever put that notion in your head?" he asked, evasively, holding a portion of the robe beneath his chin.

"I wish you had not," she rejoined, without looking at him. "It was kind of you, of course, and father has treated you very badly in being so late."

"Please don't say that," he pleaded, tossing the folded robe upon the buggy-seat and coming nearer. "It makes me feel I must have been rude, and I know it was not his fault."

"You have been far too good to us," she went on, forcing a lump of sugar between the horse's large teeth, closed coquettishly against it. "We are a horrid, ungrateful lot—all of us."

"Miss Myra," said Mr. Ramsey, "I haven't done a thing but what I'd gladly do again a thousand times, God knows."

"You have done for us more than anyone else in the world has done," the girl declared, in a passion of self-humiliation. "You took us from the very door of the poorhouse; you have sheltered us

and fed us, and now you have given us money that we can never, never pay back to you."

"Pshaw!" cried the agent, with an effort at unconcern. "That was an every-day affair between friends. I'm not worrying about getting it back from a man that can make such inventions."

"You don't think so, really," she interrupted. "Look at that ridiculous tin thing there. Part went for that, and part for a dress for me. How you must despise us!"

"You hadn't ought to put such thoughts on me," he protested. "It isn't fair."

There were tears in her eyes as she turned to him—drops from the river of Lethe, to have washed from a much meaner soul the memory of weightier obligations.

"You are a good man," she said, simply, "and I admire you very much."

"You can't do that," he answered, huskily. "There's not much in me you can admire."

"Indeed, indeed, there is," she said. "I admire your generosity and your courage in standing up for what you think is right, and your pluck in facing the pig-man."

"Don't make fun of me," he begged, coming so close to her that she could see that the end of his nose was peeling from exposure to the sun and wind, and despised herself for seeing it.

"I mean it," she said, turning away. "I mean every word of it."

It was the impulse of a woman who, when she pays at all, pays many times the debt; and it might have carried her even farther had Mr. Ramsey been a man of daring. But Mr. Ramsey was not a man of daring—at least, not then.

"I guess if you mean as much as I'd like to have you mean, you wouldn't let me know it," he ventured.

"And why shouldn't I let you know that we are very much obliged to you?" demanded Myra, dropping several lumps of sugar.

"If I thought—" began the agent, taking heart too late by sixty seconds.

"I mustn't keep you waiting," she exclaimed, remembering his engagements. "Good-night!"

But Mr. Ramsey did not appear inclined to go.

"Please wait another minute, if you can," he said. "There is something I want to ask you as a

favour. Don't have anything more to do with those pinelanders."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because I am going to have them hunted out of where they are, and they are more than likely to get ugly. I have got all the evidence I want; so if you'll just keep near this house for a while till they're gone——"

"Gone?" Myra repeated. "But where can they go?"

"That's their lookout—anywhere away from here."

"But, Mr. Ramsey," she protested, "they have nowhere to go. Can't you warn them, and let them have another chance?"

"Not much," he assured her, laughing. "I've got my chance to get them off the land, and that is more than I hoped for."

For a moment she regarded him in silence. Then she said: "Mr. Ramsey, do you want me ever to speak to you again? If you do, you must let these people know that they will not be molested as long as they do nothing wrong. You may scold them as much as you please, and threaten them; but you

must not drive them from the only home they have."

"Oh, come!" cried Mr. Ramsey, reddening. "You hadn't ought to ask me that. I'm here in the interests of the company. Of course, if it was a question of giving them time to find another place——"

"No, no!" Myra interrupted. "They could never do that; they would merely become tramps and outcasts. I don't know what would happen to them. You must leave them where they are, Mr. Ramsey; you must really—for my sake."

And, in the end, she had his promise to be lenient with the pig-people; and Mr. Ramsey, driving homeward through the long pine lanes, whistled softly to himself, as a man when he has sacrificed a principle and rejoices. And Myra, seated on a stump, reflected on the potentiality of the intangible, until Uranus, the black cat, leaping to her lap, suggested supper-time.

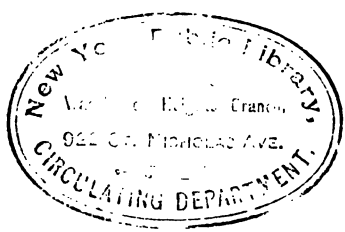
"Be 'umble, Ury, be 'umble," she admonished him, and laughed to recall that Mr. Ramsey had recognised the name as that of one Uriah Heep, in Dickens.

CHAPTER TEN

In the house she found that her father had already gone to bed for needed rest, and that her mother had a headache. Mrs. Dale always had a headache when a certain manuscript, entitled "Spirits in Prison," came back, and this was one of those occasions.

"Was there nothing else in the mail?" Myra asked, indifferently.

"No," said her mother. "Nothing else."



CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER XI

"MYRA," said Mrs. Dale one evening, as the two walked together under the pines, "I am very much troubled."

They had chosen the direction toward the Ocean Road, where there was a line of telegraph poles to look at; besides, Murray, the fishman, on his seaward way, occasionally left a newspaper for the Professor beneath a certain tree. And they walked briskly, for the air was chilly with the dampness of a coming storm.

"Troubled about what?" inquired Myra, without grave concern.

"About my story in the *Inglenook*," sighed Mrs. Dale. "They have a cut of Gustavus Adolphus that they want to use, and I don't know anything about him. And I had planned to fill up my next article with different ways of cooking reed-birds.

Dear me! there is someone coming. Who can be?"

"Why, it must be my friend, the pig-woma Myra answered, divining an approaching figu well-nigh indistinguishable in the gather shadows.

"How very interesting!" cried her moth "Perhaps we can get her to tell us the story of l life."

"No, no!" protested Myra. "Let us just spe pleasantly, and pass on. I am sure she does n want to be seen."

"That's not surprising," commented Mrs. De "I never saw anyone so untidy."

The pig-woman, who had a bag upon her ba walked with her head at the level of her shoulde She had added to her former costume a distort black straw-hat, whereon one red cotton rose hu nodding from a wire stem. At first she seemed be alone, but as she drew nearer Aleck became v ible, following sullenly behind. Since the comi of colder weather his freedom of movement had be much curtailed by a man's felt hat and boots t large by many sizes. He carried in his arms a lar

stone jug, which must have been heavy, for, when it became evident that mam intended to stop, he set it down with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Myra, you will have to do the talking," whispered Mrs. Dale. "I never know what to say to such people, and I must confess I don't like her looks."

"Oh, you needn't be afraid!" returned Myra, confidently. "She will be only too anxious to avoid us."

"What do you suppose she has in that bag?"

"Potatoes, probably. She may have been to the house of some other pinelander to exchange pork for them. That is the way they live."

The woman, now within five yards across the narrow track, stood still, and seemed to see them for the first time; but, though she dropped the bag and straightened herself, her sole response to Myra's amiable "Good-evening" was a slight protruding of the tongue.

"Good-evening!" repeated Myra, but this time with a trifle more reserve.

"Oh, I heard you," retorted the pig-woman, insolently composed, and rubbing her sides with the

palms of her hands, as though the muscles had grown stiff, while she looked to left and right, as though to estimate the chances of intrusion. "Pretty evening for a walk," she then remarked, deliberately surveying the others from head to foot.

"Yes," Myra answered, not without uneasiness; "it is quite pleasant. Won't you sit down and rest?"

"Not this evening, thank you," said the pig-woman; "I might muss me dress. But you just keep quiet a minute, and I'll tell you something—I'll tell you what I thinks of you, and the likes of you."

The voice had in it an ominous calm, and Myra, scenting mischief, stepped closer to her mother; but before she could speak, the woman went on:

"Thought you'd be neighbourly, didn't you? Wanted to buy a pig? Wanted to educate other folk's kids, and make a dude of the old man? Oh, but you're a charmer! You're a *Little Eva* from the original cast!" The pig-woman, a mistress of the art of subtle irony, seemed for a time content to veil her meaning in symbolic phrases. But suddenly her manner changed. It was as though,

having played a prelude, she, by pulling out the stops, developed all at once the power of her instrument in a resounding anthem of vituperation.

"Spy!" she shouted. "Informer! Sneak!" and, having run the gamut of admissible synonyms, added others, picturesque and forcible, culled from the argot of two continents—the aphorisms of Holborn, the shibboleths of Mulberry Bend—till Myra's feeble efforts to check her were overpowered by a torrent of invective.

"Come, mother," Myra whispered. "Let us go back."

"Indeed, I shall do nothing of the sort," answered the little woman, drawing herself to her full height.

Myra glanced down the road, in the vain hope of seeing Murray, the fishman, and the look seemed to delight the pig-woman.

"Arrah!" she cried. "It's looking after your feller, you are, or maybe for your friend the sheriff. Sure, when I was young I didn't have to look far to see a man. But I was no mean, little red-headed spy. I was a lady, if I was a sport." Her characterisations of herself were free and striking, as

were other words which followed; but language has its limits, and the anger of the pig-woman neared the boiling-point. "Take that! and that!" she cried; and, stooping, caught from her bag a handful of potatoes, which she hurled at the objects of her wrath with such accuracy of aim that one struck a tree not far above Mrs. Dale's head.

"Stop!" cried Myra, darting to shield her mother. "Stop! You will hurt us."

"Small blame to me if I do!" laughed the pig-woman, as another potato broke into fragments against a stump. "It's you that's lucky that I'm not myself."

"Boy, stop her!" commanded Mrs. Dale. "Hold her hands!"

The order had its effect, for Aleck, till then a dumb spectator of the scene, sprang forward and caught the woman by the wrist.

"Leave hold of me, you little baste!" she yelled, fiercely, trying to shake him off.

"Drop it!" he growled, clinging fast. "Drop it, I tell yer!"

There followed a scuffle, in which Aleck gained possession of the sack; but, though he clung to it

with the tenacity of a terrier, covering the prize with his body, it was improbable that the advantage could be of long duration.

"Skin out, Myradale, skin out!" he shouted. "Get away before she has me killed." And dignity giving place to self-preservation, Mrs. Dale consented to retire. As they went, the woman called after them:

"Say, come again whenever you've got nothing else to do! Neighbours ought to be sociable."

"If ever I have a fury to describe," panted Mrs. Dale, "I shall know just how she ought to look."

They had hurried down the path to what seemed to be a safe distance. Glancing back, Myra could see the woman and boy picking up the spilled potatoes amicably enough.

"But, mother, were not you afraid of her?" the girl asked. She had never seen her parent under fire before.

"Not in the least," said Mrs. Dale. "I was so glad to be reminded of potatoes."

"Of potatoes?"

"Why, yes; the inspiration came to me at once. Gustavus Adolphus, during one of his campaigns,

was approached by an orderly, who said: 'Sire, the enemy has captured all our cooking utensils; we have some reed-birds and some potatoes, but not a pannikin remains.' At this the king, who never missed an opportunity to give his officers a lesson, cried: 'Fool! put a reed-bird in each potato, and cook them in the ashes. Never let a soldier of mine admit that he is crippled by the foe!' Of course, I can go on from that. I shall call the dish 'Reed-birds *à la* Leipsic.'"

"Mother," cried Myra, reverently, "I consider that your masterpiece!"

At the Ocean Road, when they had found the *Thebes Weekly Clarion* under the tree, Myra suggested that they should go a little farther.

"I have discovered a mystery," she said. "One of the telegraph poles is striped red and white half way up."

"Dear me!"

"And there is an inscription upon it."

"Really? What does it say?"

"It is rather indistinct, but I made out the words—

"'Shave, Five Cents; with Bay Rum, Ten Cents.'"

"How very singular! What can it mean, so far rom any house?"

"Murray, the fishman, says the poles were used some city, till they made a law forbidding their e, and then they were brought here."

"That is not very much of a mystery."

"Perhaps not, mother; but to me it is a poem. ncy the poor old pole brought back to the forest ain, with all the scars of its ignoble service in the rld. Think of the things it must dream of here me—the muddy street, the barber-shop, the ggons going past, and all the bustle of a squalid ighbourhood. How it must hate these silly little plings, who are only green because they happen have roots!"

"Myra," interrupted Mrs. Dale. "What are u talking about?"

"About the telegraph-pole, mother," replied yra. "But I am thinking of the pig-woman." Though they did not see the pig-woman again for ny days, the wind seemed charged with warnings her stealthy, waddling step throughout the week rain that followed. For the Indian summer had ne—the time of mellow light and violet shadow

—and in its place came autumn, bleak and desolate. Mist in the morning, rain at noon—mist and rain and winds that roared among the pine, till, with spray upon the face from the opened door, one might have fancied the sound of deep-sea combers rolling from the east.

Once, when the storm had lifted for an hour, Myra, in rubbers, ventured as far as the pit. But here she found her garden desolate, and remained only long enough to secure the slamming cabin-door. Of the children she saw nothing, but for several mornings a heap of pine-cones was found upon the kitchen step. And the home-made caramels left there—in a tomato-can—by way of acknowledgment, disappeared regularly. One day the empty can contained a smooth chip, on which were scrawled in charcoal the words "Gud Bi." And after that there were no more cones.

During the slowly passing days the Professor worked upon his vibraphone, or discoursed upon the great disaster which should come with the conjunction of Saturn and Uranus, on January 6th, his interest in the invention doing much to set at naught his own forebodings. Mrs. Dale, discover-

ing that the " Spirits in Prison " needed polishing, polished industriously. Myra made a dress, and devised a planet—a pleasant planet, filled with pleasant people, where pine children wore sailor-suits and pig-women kept boarders, and inventions could be patented without a fee, and gentlemen in gray said " So! "

Once, when the rain beat on the window and the shutter rattled in her small room beneath the eaves, and it had grown too dark to see her thread, she said:

" Come, Uranus; it is time to rest ourselves. That little box there on the table, if you please. And now a match; and don't forget your part, ' Ron-ron! ' "

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER XII

THANKSGIVING-DAY brought back the south wind and the sun, and in the pine-land only the green, new-fallen needles, strewn above the brown, told of the days of storm and wind. Mr. Ramsey was expected to mark the festival by dining at Pineopolis at some vague hour in the afternoon; but, otherwise, Thanksgiving promised to be much like any other day.

Myra, who had heard nothing from her pine children since the message of the chip, stood calling them beside the pool:

"Aleck! Sis! Come here, I have something for you!"

Her work-bag hung from her arm, distended to the bursting-point; and the fear that it might go back unemptied gave a supplicating cadence to her voice.

"Come, don't you hear me? Come!" she called

again. And presently the forest gave an answer. Not Aleck's imitation of an owl, nor Sis's rendering of the crow's caw, though something that the pines had heard before—an Alpine yodel, so loud and clear and unmistakable that Myra caught her breath. Once more it came, this time initiative, and demanding a response; and Myra, as she answered, scarcely knew what she did, for the impossible had come to pass.

What happened was just what should have happened, and after the manner in which things would always happen if left to follow reasonable laws; and, when a horseman issued from the forest, Myra was not really very much surprised. He was a tall, brown horseman on a tall, brown horse, who leaped some intervening shrubs, and seemed to know exactly where to stop.

"Good-morning, Mr. Christensen," said Myra, holding out her hand; and Mr. Christensen, who was already on his feet, uncovered his blond head and took the hand. He made no pretence of surprise at meeting her, and expressed no conventional pleasure.

"Have you been quite well?" he asked; and,

being answered, led his horse to a tree, loosened the girth, and made the bridle fast.

"I lost my way," he said, rejoining her, as though the hour of his coming had been understood. "And but for two small children I don't know where I should have wandered."

"Children!" exclaimed Myra. "Where were they? What were they doing?"

"I met them about a mile from here," he told her, "and they appeared to be on guard beside the trail. When they saw me they ran, and I was forced to gallop after them for my information; but, when it came, it was most satisfactory."

"Oh!" said Myra, colouring.

"And may we not sit down?" he asked. "Just as we did before; and will not you look exactly as you did that day?"

"I can't do that," she answered, laughing. "I have a new dress."

"So!" said Mr. Christensen. "That makes no difference."

"It does to me," she said.

Mr. Christensen, upon the ground, thrust his spurs into the needles, and laid his hat beside them.

"I trust that Mrs. Dale is well," he said.

"Yes, thank you," Myra responded; "and so is my father, and so is Mr. Ramsey, I believe. I suppose you saw him in Thebes?"

"Naturally you suppose so, knowing my regard for that gentleman; but, as it happens, I have not been in Thebes," he rejoined, with a provoking want of frankness.

"I forgot that the colony has been given up," she explained.

"Yes; the colony has gone to Tennessee, most fortunately for the pines."

"Well?" said Myra, after a moment's pause.

"Well, what?" he demanded, calmly.

"Well, suppose I should appear from the moor on horseback, would you have no curiosity?"

"Not I; the fact would be sufficient. Do you know Morgantown?"

"Yes; it is about twenty miles from here."

"Twelve, only," he corrected her. "I have a friend who cultivates colts near there, and, knowing my fondness for colts, he invited me to pass the holiday with him and them. This morning we were to see them jump, but, instead, I stole a colt and rode away—a rather dishonest proceeding, was it not?"

"Very," assented Myra. "What excuse will you make when you get back?"

"I must rely on you to help me find one."

"On me? My suggestion would be of very little use."

"We have a saying in Sweden," he remarked, laughing—"'Ask a child to pray for you, a beginner to play for you, and a girl to guide you.'"

"A very foolish proverb—even for Sweden," she commented. "Girls have very little judgment—they are always doing the silliest possible things."

"So?" he rejoined. "And what have you been doing?"

Myra, taking up a handful of green needles, began to weave a chain with them.

"My opportunities for doing even silly things are very limited," she said.

Mr. Christensen, with other needles, made an experiment upon his own account.

"And that is why you pass your time amusing little ragged children," he speculated.

"I am afraid they find me anything but amusing," she answered, flushing, "for they have not been near me for days."

When she had told him something of the pigman and his wife, and the pineland generally, he said:

"All that would interest my uncle very much. He is a student of sociology."

"Indeed!" said Myra.

"Yes; if he had remained at home he would have been in prison long ago."

"Really?" she asked. "I should be proud to have a relative like him."

"My uncle bade me express to you his high regard," said Mr. Christensen, so simply that Myra took this for a formal civility not unusual in Sweden.

"That is a beautiful horse," she observed, somewhat hurriedly. "But don't you think he must be thirsty?"

"I had forgotten all about him," the horseman confessed, springing to his feet. "I meant to let him cool off a little first; but you are more kind-hearted."

"I am not in the least kind-hearted," she protested; "it was just a selfish wish to pat his nose."

As the colt stood fetlock deep in the cool water,

Myra, contrasting his shapely limbs with others more familiar, said:

"I am sure you must have chosen the prettiest of the colts."

"Then you must some day allow me to choose one for you," said Mr. Christensen, so seriously that Myra laughed.

"Oh, yes," she promised; "whenever I buy a horse, you shall give me your advice."

Mr. Christensen appeared unreasonably gratified.

"I hope that will be soon," he said; and the colt regarded both with approbation.

When Mr. Christensen had explained that the animal should have at least another half-hour's rest, they went back to the knoll again, and resumed the making of needle-chains. If he had merely stolen a mount to break a dull day at the Morgantown paddocks it had been nice of him to remember his acquaintances in the pines, and he appeared to consider this so much a matter of course that Myra forgot she had forbidden him to come. They were such old friends now on this, their second meeting, that the follies of the first

were forgotten—even the necessity of talkin which is the highest bar that friendship has to lea

Her fingers idly added link upon link to t chain, and he watched her. Perceiving that t occupation satisfied him, she said:

"I think you might suggest something amu ing."

"So? Well, let us have a match. We will sta even, and see who can make the longest chain in given time—say an hour—and, meanwhile, neith one must speak a word."

"If that is your idea of amusement, it is n mine," she replied.

"Oh, it was only a suggestion. Now it is yo turn to make one."

"I suggest that you tell me what you saw t last time you went to the theatre."

"That I do not remember. But I will tell y something that I did, if you would care to hear

"Please do."

"I bought two seats, and pretended I was n alone."

"That was very extravagant," commented Myr

"But you can't think how I enjoyed it, nor h agreeable my silent companion was."

"I can imagine that he must have been delightful; and then, too, you could put your hat on his lap without appearing rude."

"My companion had a blue sun-bonnet on her lap already."

"Indeed! She must have dressed hurriedly," remarked Myra, with constraint, realising that Mr. Christensen had become occult. "If I were you, I should not invite her again."

"Is that a girl's advice?"

"Yes; it is my advice," she answered, softly. "You would be awfully disappointed in her a second time. And, besides,"—with an almost imperceptible lifting of the chin—"besides, she might not accept."

Presently, looking up at her after a long, unnoted pause, he said:

"It is very nice to hear the trees again,"—as though they had heard them together many times.

"Sometimes I think the pines are stupid," she mused. "They can only repeat the things you think aloud—like rain or railway trains."

"Like my little tram in Stockholm," he told her, "which used to sing when I came back from school,

'Home again! Home again!' The last time I heard it," he added, "it said only 'Never again! Never again!'"

She gave him one quick glance of sympathy, perhaps meant less for the self-reliant man in corduroys than for a little, fair-haired boy who had rejoiced at going home. She hoped they had been very good to him.

"But you will go back some day," she said.

"Never again, perhaps," he said, "unless——"

He did not tell what might occur to take him back; but she guessed that there would be no one there to welcome him.

"No; I shall never return now," he went on, with a laugh. "I shall stay here and be an American—an American with a ridiculous foreign accent—all my life."

Myra tossed her head.

"I am sure you are secretly very proud of speaking English perfectly."

"So!" admitted Mr. Christensen. "But of just what to do under all circumstances I am still ignorant. There I shall always be a foreigner."

"Then I should do exactly what would be right at home," she counselled him.

"And that is your advice?" he asked, a trifle seriously, she thought, for the occasion; but then Mr. Christensen was always serious.

"Yes," she said, laughing; "that is a girl's advice."

"Thank you for it," he said, rising; "and now you must give me my excuse for coming."

"Would it not be enough to say you went to call on an acquaintance?" she asked.

"No," he returned. "Not half enough."

And Myra thought his host must be a most exacting man.

He stood beside his horse, the reins hung lightly from his arm. She held out her hand to say goodbye.

"I wish you a very pleasant ride," she said.

"And I wish you every happiness till we meet again," he answered. Then, without warning, he took the small brown hand and raised it—scratched and sticky with turpentine—to his lips for an instant—for the briefest instant—a usage foreign to the pines, but perhaps one of those which she had advised him to follow when in doubt.

Mr. Christensen was standing very straight, his

heels drawn close together, in the manner of a soldier. He had grown pale, she saw with wonder; and, when he spoke again, he had the air of saying something of great importance.

"My homage to your mother," he said, with an absurdly formal bow.

"Thank you," Myra responded, looking at him curiously.

"And may I bear a message to my uncle?" he inquired, still erect.

"Of course," she answered, in confusion. "Anything you think he would like to hear."

"Thank you," said Mr. Christensen, as though it were a compact.

Doubtless this form of leave-taking was as it should have been in Sweden; but Myra thought rather less of Sweden as he rode away.

At the clearing's edge he turned to lift his hat, and Myra waved her hand. When he had gone, she watched a branch that he had touched sway to and fro, and come at last to rest. For a time she heard him speaking to his horse, checking his impatience, guiding him through the trees, and, long before she had ceased to listen, there was nothing

but the singing of the pines to hear. She had forgotten to tell him of his silver cup or to thank him for the cigarettes.

After the open forest the sitting-room seemed dark, and a fire newly kindled on the hearth made the atmosphere a trifle oppressive. Myra knew that Mr. Ramsey must be somewhere in the room, for she had seen the buggy in its accustomed place; but she did not look for him.

"Dear me, Myra," said her mother, glancing up from the *Clarion* of Thebes, "I had begun to fear you had met that pig-woman again."

"Which pig-woman?" demanded the Professor, in a tone implying large acquaintance among pig-women.

Myra closed the door and stood beside it, panting a little from the hurry of her walk. In her hand she held the fragments of her needle-chain, and her head was bare.

"Surely you have not been out without a hat?" exclaimed her mother, noting a deficiency.

"Why, no; I had my sun-bonnet. I must have dropped it somewhere; it was so warm."

"I found it rather chilly driving," put in Mr.

Ramsey, from the trunk. He had abandoned hope of direct recognition.

"Yes, it must have been cool," Myra admitted, coming forward. "Mother, am I too late to help with the dinner?"

"Why, child, it is only twelve o'clock. Sit down and rest yourself," Mrs. Dale suggested, removing worsted from a place beside her on the sofa. "You look quite feverish. I never saw your eyes so bright."

"They are that," assented Mr. Ramsey.

"Please don't mind me, mother," protested Myra, laughing nervously. "I am a little out of breath, but not the least tired."

The Professor yawned.

"Was there anything of importance going on in Thebes?" he asked the agent, for Mr. Ramsey's visit was a social one, and carried with it certain social rights.

"Not much," responded Mr. Ramsey. "You remember that Swedish fellow who was here a while ago? Somebody told me he was in Morgantown last night. They saw him driving from the station with that Henty, who owns a stock-farm. I guess likely he is looking for a horse."

"Can't you imagine visiting a friend without wanting to buy anything?" demanded Myra, somewhat shortly.

"But I don't know that they are friends," protested Mr. Ramsey. "I don't know anything about either of them, except that Henty is richer than all out doors, and pretty well stuck on himself. I guess his friends would be likely gilt-edged, too."

"Then Mr. Christensen did not strike you as being what you call gilt-edged?"

"Well, hardly!" Mr. Ramsey chuckled. "That is, if I'm a judge. There's mighty few as civil-spoken as he was unless they have their money still to get."

"Generalities!" sniffed the Professor, with a gesture of deprecation; "worthless generalities, that disregard the basic facts. If Jupiter be well placed, or in the house of honour, a man remains himself in spite of opulence; but given Mercury afflicted, Mars cadent, or the sun in Capricorn, a very little every-day advancement will destroy his balance. In the higher socialism, one fitted only for the lower walks of life will be compelled to remain there."

"I wonder how it is with me?" laughed Mr. Ramsey. "I don't know what time of day it was, but I was born on the tenth of January."

"On that date," said the Professor, "the sun is most undoubtedly in Capricorn."

"I think it very rude to say so," Mrs. Dale interjected.

"Rude?" sniffed the Professor. "Do I control the zodiac?"

"I guess all the prosperity I get won't hurt me much," remarked Mr. Ramsey.

"And so that colony has gone to Tennessee," put in Myra, to divert the conversation.

"Why, how did you know that?" inquired Mr. Ramsey. "I only heard of it myself this morning, through a letter from Colonel Blunt."

"Possibly an instance of thought transference," speculated Myra; and Mr. Ramsey moved uneasily.

"I never took much stock in Christian Science," he observed. "I think the old ideas most likely to be truest."

"But thought transference is as old as Homer," argued Myra. Never at a loss for facts she would to-day have braved a bishop.

"I have always understood that Oliver Wendell Homer was a Unitarian," retorted Mr. Ramsey, not to be put down.

"Myra," said Myra's mother, "if your grandfather could hear you sometimes, he would turn in his grave."

"Folly!" snorted the Professor, rising and leaving the room, with great deliberation.

The dinner on Thanksgiving-Day was like all the other dinners eaten in Pineopolis. It differed from them in one material particular only—Mr. Ramsey, for once upon a purely social footing, had brought no contribution. Moreover, in the time of preparation he made no offer of assistance, but listened to his host in the workshop, as though collapsible seats had all the charm of novelty.

"Really," Myra declared to her mother, as they compounded Lincoln pudding, "this is too absurd."

"You are never just to Mr. Ramsey," declared her mother. "His tact appears to be instinctive. Are you sure we have not put in sugar twice?"

"Like his knowledge of the classics," added Myra. "Mother, you ought to stir more briskly."

"Compare him with that deceitful Mr. Christensen," began Mrs. Dale, bringing her spoon to rest.

"Oh, I should never think of such a thing!" protested Myra. "Stir, mother, stir!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER XIII

MR. CHRISTENSEN had come again, and he had gone, leaving some horse's tracks beside the pool, and several other impressions more or less distinct. When he had bounded into sight upon his borrowed colt, Myra had fancied him to have taken greater pains to be there than afterward appeared, and this notion, foolish as it was, remained. Also another—that he had found the ride worth less than whatever trouble it had cost. But when events come few and far between, one is apt to dwell upon them over-much; and even such meaningless phrases as "till we meet again," uttered in a formal, foreign way, take on undue importance.

"Child, why are you so much interested in the mail?" her mother asked one day, a fortnight after the festivities of Thanksgiving-Day. "Are you expecting anything?"

And Myra, lowering her head, replied:

"No, mother; you know I never get letters."

"Dear me! I wish your father did not," sighed Mrs. Dale. "He has had several lately that he hides."

"Perhaps they are about the great calamities that are to come in January," suggested Myra. "You know he says the world is to be destroyed, although I am sure he cannot believe it."

"Indeed, you may be sure it is something worse than that," her mother replied. "He has been restless since he went to Thebes a month ago. I hope it is not money. I hope he has not found anyone to lend him money."

Myra caught her breath.

"He must have had some to buy all those things," she said.

"Dear me! I never thought of that," cried Mrs. Dale. "Where do you suppose it came from?"

"From Mr. Ramsey," declared Myra, boldly.

Mrs. Dale sank limply to a chair.

"The only friend we had left," she almost moaned.

"Mother," cried Myra, bringing down her foot,

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"I am going away. I am going to earn money and support myself, and send all I can save back to you and father. I am going to be an actress, a nursery governess, or anything that don't demand experience."

"Oh, child; you mustn't talk like that!" her mother sobbed. "Your grandfather would turn in his grave. Oh, Myra! if you ever went on the stage, I should have to be there to take care of you!" Even in her real distress a crumb of consolation had appeared before Mrs. Dale.

It was early forenoon, and they supposed themselves alone in the pineland; therefore the cheerful whoa! of Mr. Ramsey, heard without, was a distinct surprise.

"I put up at the workmen's cabin at the bog last night," he said, in joyous explanation of his presence, "and now I'm driving back to town. I came around this way to see if some of you folks wouldn't like to drive in. I'd bring you back to-night, along with some tools the men have got to have."

Mr. Ramsey's invitation, though inclusive, had not been spoken loud enough to penetrate the workshop door, and, from the direction of his eyes, one might have guessed its inner meaning.

"I should like very much to go to Thebes," said Myra.

"To where?" demanded the Professor, whose sense of hearing was acute, as from the door-way he became a factor in the dialogue.

"To Thebes," repeated Myra. "Mr. Ramsey has invited me to go."

"In that case," said her father, "you must not forget to call at Shinn's for a small bottle of machine-oil that I purchased, and he omitted to put in the buggy. Insist on getting it, for Shinn is a great rascal."

"I will make a little list of what I need," said Mrs. Dale—"benzine, and ink, and chocolate per-permints." When Myra had gone running up the open stair to fetch her hat, her mother asked of Mr. Ramsey, with casual interest:

"Are there any theatrical people in Thebes at present?"

"Why, the Brazilian Bell-Ringers are billed to show to-night," he answered, "and they say they're great. Do you think Miss Myra would care to see them?"

"No, indeed," said Mrs. Dale; "and you must

promise me not to let her out of your sight for a single instant."

"If it had been 'Uncle Tom,'" cried Myra from the stairs, "I don't believe mother would have allowed you to have the pleasure of my society, Mr. Ramsey."

"Nonsense!" put in the elder lady, proudly. "I am sure my child would never do a foolish thing without her mother's advice."

Mr. Ramsey looked a trifle puzzled; but then he often found the family puzzling. He would have liked to urge the merits of the bell-ringers at greater length, but the sight of Myra in her hat, with the spotted veil that kissed her straight, short nose, deterred him. Even in the old blue sunbonnet he had found her at times irresistible.

"You will have to excuse the buggy's not having been washed," he told her, gathering up the reins.

"I trust you have a docile horse," called the Professor from the door.

"I guess he hasn't changed much since you brought out the windiphone," the agent called back.

"This is a great day for me," he went on.

When once the cross-roads were well behind the brown horse settled down to a satisfactory homeward gait.

"And for me, too," said his companion. "I have not seen a field for weeks and weeks."

"You only had to say the word," protested Mr. Ramsey, flicking a pine-bough with his whip.

"Oh, yes; I know," Myra assented. "But I did not want to see them until to-day." Her eyes were on the patch of light far down the sombre vista, but coming every moment nearer.

"I hope you will like it well enough to drive over again," persisted Mr. Ramsey. "It's sorter shut up in the pines for you. I think it does a person good to see a little something different once in a while."

"I have the pig-man's children," she reminded him. "They come quite regularly now."

This brought up what was, in a way, a common interest, and he told her of a message he had sent the pig-man, warning him to amend his ways, or take the consequences.

"I guess I scared them for a time; but, with a low-down lot like that, it won't do any lasting

good," he opined, and Myra could not but admit that he had acted leniently.

"I am very much obliged to you," she said.

"You needn't be," he answered. "It's always better to go slow."

The patch of light had grown larger—as large as a door opening from a dark church out into the sunlight—and presently they had left the deep shades of the pines behind. The road now lay between rail-fences, guarding illimitable reaches of corn-land, grass-land, and fallow. Every quarter of a mile there was a farm-house, an orchard, and a well. There were barns, and sheds, and barn-yards everywhere, and in the air a smell of milk and of hay.

In the fields men tended stubble-fires or gathered rustling corn-stalks into stacks, working leisurely as farmers may in autumn, when the work is slack. Sometimes a woman looked out from a window in shamefaced curiosity, and often children shouted noisy, nasal greetings from the gates. Except where a field of winter wheat grew green, the earth was red as the tillage of Mars—red as the round sun hanging in the hazy sky.

"Oh, isn't it beautiful?" cried Myra, sitting erect to look about.

"It is pretty sightly for a fact," assented Mr. Ramsey; "but for my taste, I'd like it as well if it wasn't quite so flat."

"I wasn't thinking of that," she demurred. "I mean the world, and all the people in it."

Turning her head, she saw the pines—dark and level as a sullen ocean in the east—and at the moment she would have been glad had this been her last glimpse of them.

"Some day I'm going to get all you folks to come in and take dinner at the Union House," announced the agent; and Myra's little dream of liberty was gone. Beyond the pines, the world to her must mean no more than Mr. Ramsey and the Union House.

"That will be very nice," she said. "It is kind of you to think of it."

"Maybe, if there was a show in town, you'd stay all night," he went on, much encouraged.

"That would be very nice," she said again.

When the wooden spires of Thebes drew near, objects of interest began to multiply—door-yards

and dogs, baby-carriages and bay-windows—and Mr. Ramsey pointed out improvements in the town with his whip.

"I guess the squire's built that fence since you were here," he said.

"Has he? What a pretty colour he has painted it!"

"Some folks thought the yellow was a little loud."

"Oh, I like it; it's so cheerful!"

As they passed the Union House, Shinn's store, and the Masonic Hall, Myra wondered why she had ever thought Thebes unattractive.

She descended at the carriage-block before the Baptist Church.

"I shall be ready to go back when you are," she declared. And Mr. Ramsey, banishing a wild and reckless dream of dinner at the Union House, agreed to meet her in just one hour.

"I've got to get those pick-handles back to the bog," he said; "but any time to-day will do. Is there any chance of your getting hungry?"

"Oh, I shall buy some ginger-snaps to eat going back," she told him, with a reassuring nod, and left him.

For a while she lingered before the milliner's window, looking at most outrageous hats, which she did not see. On the bridge she watched the water hurrying by, powdered with sawdust from the mill, and once she turned into a by-way to avoid a woman whom she had known. Myra detested everyone whom she had known in Thebes. Finally, when half an hour of the time had slipped away, she walked directly to the general store of Paul and Peter Shinn, and entered.

The atmosphere within was charged with many smells—leather and soap, and cloth and kerosene. Three citizens beside the stove spat dolefully; a new clerk lolled upon a crate of rubber-boots, and beside the candy-case a small child with a nickel waited patiently. At sight of Myra the new clerk, who derived his humour from the circus, slid from his box, remarking, casually:

"Hoop la!"

Perceiving that her errand had to do with the post-office, he leaped the counter gracefully, and presently his head appeared behind the small official window.

"What name?" he asked, with an insinuating smile.

"Dale."

"Spelled D-a-l-e, ain't it? Pine folks, aren't they? I usually give their mail to Mr. Ramsey. D—D—D"—the young man overhauled the contents of compartment D—"D—Dickle—Dabney—Dunn—Dale. Here you are! It ain't for you, though, Miss."

The letter was for her father—a thick envelope in an unfamiliar hand; but Myra scarcely glanced at it.

"Please look again," she said, rising on her toes to peer into the inclosure. "One might have got astray, you know, among so many."

"Not likely; but I'll look. We aim to please," the young man said. "Dickle—Dabney—Dunn, and Darling. That couldn't be it, now, could it?" and the young man, putting his head upon one side, smiled.

"Please look in all the other boxes," said Myra, almost in command.

"Whew!" he whistled. "Do you want me to go through the alphabet?"

"Yes," Myra answered; "if you please."

The operation lasted several minutes, and though

the new clerk feigned exhaustion more than once, it was performed with thoroughness.

"Zedkowsky!" he said, finally. "I'm sorry, but that's our line of goods. Now let me show you something else."

"I am very much obliged to you, indeed," said Myra. "I want to buy some ginger-snaps."

"Square, round, or scalloped?" demanded the alert young man—"with holes in them, or without?"

"Just ginger-snaps," said Myra, wearily.

When Mr. Ramsey found her, seated on the horse-block before the Baptist Church, she had a little row of packages before her—benzine and ink and peppermints.

"Is there anywhere you'd like to go before we start for home?" he asked, when she was seated once more in the buggy.

"If you don't mind," she answered, "I should like to drive past our old house."

"All right, if you say so," Mr. Ramsey assented, doubtfully. "But the property has gone down some since you folks went away."

"Has it been empty?"

"No; not exactly that. But what's the use of looking at it? It's terribly run down."

"But what sort of people are living there?" she demanded.

"Well, it was old, you know, and in disrepair," he stammered, "and they let it to a family——"

"What family?"

Mr. Ramsey reddened to the back of his sunburned neck.

"I don't know who they are," he murmured; "but I've heard that they are coloured."

"I hope they pay their rent more regularly than we did," said Myra; and neither spoke again till they had passed the squire's yellow fence. Then Mr. Ramsey inquired: "Are those pick-handles in your way?" And Myra assured him that they afforded her a convenient footstool.

"I am going to take you out the Morgantown Pike a-ways," he went on, as they drove out of Thebes. "We can strike the pines by the north road, which will make a little variety."

"That will be very nice," she agreed.

"I hope those clouds don't mean rain," remarked the agent, looking skyward. "The weather we've been having couldn't keep up forever."

"No," she admitted; "it has been too bright to last."

The afternoon had grown cold and colourless, without sun or shadow, and the world seemed seen through dim glass. In the distance the clouds appeared to touch the pinelands, if indeed the long, dark streak upon the horizon were not a heavier belt of hanging vapour.

"Do you think it will rain before we get home?" Myra asked.

"No; not so soon as that. I wouldn't bet on rain at all. There's been some fires south, and like enough those clouds are mostly smoke."

Houses were few along the pike, and, except a negro driving a cow, they saw no one for a mile. But the track was harder than on the less frequented roads, and, if possible, redder. The fences, too, bore evidences of a higher civilisation, in desultory, admonitory sentences: "Go to Cohen's for hats and caps," and a wearisome, recurrent jingle:

> "Exchange that ancient machine of thine
> For a Buckley and Bradford Number Nine."

Here and there well-meaning hands had daubed upon the rails rude letters conveying terrible mes-

sages: "Prepare to meet thy God!" "Shall it be heaven or hell?" "Remember death!"

Mr. Ramsey, who seldom ventured upon initiative, became silent, whilst Myra counted seven allusions to the desirable number nine, and four reminders of mortality. Then there was a sound of wheels and hoofs behind them, and the agent drew aside to yield the right of way to a more rapid traveller.

Immediately abreast of them appeared the heads of two black horses, rather over-dressed in point of chains and buckles, and, following them, a shining side-bar road-waggon, in which the driver, in a large drab coat, sat smoking a cigar. With a nod in acknowledgment of the agent's courtesy he urged his horses faster, and in another moment his broad back was far ahead.

"That's that fellow I was telling you about," observed Mr. Ramsey; "the one who owns that stock-farm at Morgantown where the Swedish fellow stopped. Did you notice his rig?"

"No," answered Myra. "Other people's things don't interest me."

"That team ought to interest anyone," persisted

Mr. Ramsey, his latent love of sport aroused. "They're pure Hambletonian. You should see that nigh one under the saddle. He's a bute!"

"I don't like horses," she replied, "and I don't like people who go tearing past you just to show off. I want to get home just as quick as I can."

"It wouldn't take us long if we had those Hambletonians."

Myra gave the pick-handles a small, impatient kick, but held her peace.

"I guess this driving sixteen miles on a stretch is pretty tiresome, when you're not used to it," Mr. Ramsey said, considerately, when the pause had lasted for a mile.

"I am a little tired," she admitted, leaning her head against the buggy's faded lining. By-and-by, after a long time, as it seemed, they neared the pines again. First, there were stumps in the fields, then piles of yellow cord-wood, newly split, and then the long, sweet, murmuring alleys arched above them, calm as a cloister, restful as a church.

"Oh, it is good to be back again!" Myra cried, drawing long breaths of fragrant air. "Oh, I shall never, never leave the pines again!"

"I shouldn't like anything better than to have a house right here on the edge," assented Mr. Ramsey; "so you'd get the pine air, and see out at the same time."

"Oh, I don't want to see out. I want to live in the forest, where no one could ever find me."

"Maybe that would be healthier," said Mr. Ramsey, doubtfully. "I say," he cried a moment later, "don't you see something on ahead?"

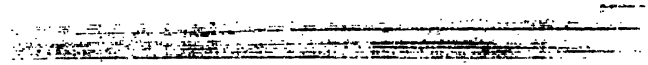
"Why, yes," she agreed, looking into the distance; "something like a big snake right across the road."

"Pshaw!" he laughed. "There couldn't be a snake that big. It's a tree that has fallen."

"What shall we do—turn back?"

"I guess not, before we have to," he replied, confidently. "We've come six miles, and two times six is twelve."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



CHAPTER XIV

"SHALL I get out?" inquired Myra.

"Yes, if you like," said Mr. Ramsey. "But there isn't any hurry."

He had stepped to the road-side, and both were face to face with a dilemma. Before them a stout young trunk lay directly across the road from side to side; on either hand the trees stood scarce a yard apart; the sandy track, worn hub-deep below the general level of the forest, was so narrow that turning back was now impossible. Had the barrier been planned, no better spot could have been chosen.

"What shall we do?" demanded Myra, with feminine impatience for conclusions; but her tone implied confidence. As she watched the agent's light eyes grow keen to take in every detail of the situation, she felt that, whatever should be done, would be effectual and workman-like, and the best

thing possible. And there was also a spice of adventure in the difficulty not without attraction.

"How do you suppose it came to fall?" she asked. "There has not been much wind lately."

"Some squatter has cut it down for spite," he answered, pushing back his hat, and Myra, recalling the pig-man, looked about her apprehensively.

"Oh, he's not likely to be within a mile of here," he reassured her. "The first thing we've got to do is to take out the horse."

As he stooped to loosen the nearest trace, Myra, springing out upon the other side, began to tug at buckles with her small brown hands.

"All clear over there?" he called out, taking her success for granted.

"It will be in a minute," she rejoined. "The straps are a little stiff."

"Shall I come round?"

"No; it's all right now."

Mr. Ramsey led the horse around the barrier, and tied him to a tree beyond.

"How much can you push?" he asked, laughing, when he had returned. As ever, he was at his best in action—executive and self-assured. The

pioneer in him was to the fore—the master-workman, the commonwealth builder.

"I'm sure I don't know," said Myra; "but I am very strong for a girl."

The agent drew the buggy forward, and, mounting on the tree-trunk, lifted the fore-wheels bodily by the shafts.

"You push from behind," he commanded. "Not too hard, but just enough not to let her run back. All right! that's done; she'll hold herself now. Come round on this side."

Myra clambered up the bank, and, flushed with action and the promise of success, ran through the trees as though it were a game in which she feared to lose her innings.

"Lord, you're all out of breath!" expostulated Mr. Ramsey. "Sit down and rest. You must be tired, shoving like that."

"And did I really help?" she panted.

"Rather! I had to lift straight up, and if you had not sent her ahead, we never could have fetched it."

He next contrived an arrangement of hitching-rope and straps, by which the horse could lend assistance at a safe distance.

"I'll go behind this time and lift," he said, "while you just lead him forward when I give the word."

When everything was ready, "Let her go!" cried Mr. Ramsey.

"Get up!" said Myra, speaking to the horse.

"Steady!"

"Whoa!"

"Go ahead!"

"Get up!"

"Now—easy!"

"Whoa!"

"Eureka!"

"Splendid!"

Mr. Ramsey's forehead was beady, and Myra's face was pink. He had lost a cuff, and she had torn her best dress. The ginger-snaps had fallen out, the harness was in knots; but they had striven together and overcome, and, sitting on either side of the narrow, sandy track, they laughed more freely than they had ever before laughed together. The fresh pine air was all about them, the glamour of the way-side. They were alone, dusty and disreputable, but not ashamed. The barrier they had

passed was between them and the world. Before them the forest—primeval and elemental—whispered of life sufficient in itself.

"Sit still," he said, when she made a motion to rise, for the sense of leadership lingered in him. "Sit there and rest till I get things straightened out."

"No; I shall do my share of straightening out," she answered, springing to her feet. She began to shake the fallen lap-robe free of needles, but Mr. Ramsey tried to take it from her.

"I'm section-boss on this particular bit of track," he said, "and you're a passenger."

"I'm not!" she protested. "You said just now I helped."

"You did, indeed; but that's all over now. I hated to have you work so hard."

As they faced each other, each clinging resolutely to a corner of the shabby cloth, an inspiration came to Mr. Ramsey.

"If I had my way, you'd never lift your hand to anything again," he said, with sudden daring. "If I had my way, you'd have a hired-girl to tie your shoes."

Myrà relaxed her hold.

"Mr. Ramsey," she said, stepping back a pace, "do you want to make me walk three miles home?"

"No," he responded, blankly; "why should you do that?"

"Then let us get ready and go on as soon as possible."

They scarcely spoke again till the cross-road clearing made an opening far ahead; and then she said:

"You mustn't think me ungrateful to you for taking me to Thebes, or for the many other things you have done for us."

Mr. Ramsey did not look at her. During the last two miles his eyes had been directed toward the distance, as though fixed upon some object there by which he steered.

"I don't go much on gratitude," he remarked. "You either like a person or you don't, and that's the end of it."

"But there are different ways of liking," she insisted.

"Maybe," he admitted. "But there is only one way that counts."

Myra bit her lip. A clear understanding with Mr. Ramsey was imperative before they reached the clearing, and that was not very far away.

"Friendship counts for a great deal," she assured him; "and you have been a true friend to us."

"Are you going to let me keep right on as before?" he asked, turning his eyes upon her, full in supplication.

"Of course," she said. "Why should I not?"

"And if there ever should be any chance of something more," he went on, a new ring in his voice, "you'll promise to let me know. Not tell me anything, of course—just let me know."

Myra hung her head. There, in the bottom of the buggy with the pick-handles, lay the letter for her father, in an unfamiliar hand. Perhaps it meant new difficulties; perhaps it brought disappointment about some money with which he had hoped to pay his debt—all letters stood for disappointments. What was to happen when the agent began to expect repayment? What was to happen should the company require Pineopolis for paying tenants, now that the paintless house in Thebes was

occupied by negroes? What was she, at best, but a foolish, useless pineland girl? As once before, the impulse to acquit herself of debt, and pay a pound for every penny, seized her.

"Mr. Ramsey," she said, "I will let you know now. If you really want me to like you, I will promise to try."

Mr. Ramsey threw back his head and laughed.

"That does not sound like very much," he said. "But you are not a girl to lead a fellow on for nothing."

"I only said I would try," she reminded him, drawing a little away.

"Oh, I can wait," he said. "I'll wait a month, or a year, or any time you say."

When Pineopolis was reached Mr. Ramsey became gaiety itself. Refusing to sit down, and moving restlessly about the room, he joked with the Professor about the bottle of machine-oil, which had been discovered in a pocket of his duster after his daughter had started for Thebes; he rallied Mrs. Dale concerning her management of chickens, and he teased Uranus, the cat.

"Now, if Miss Myra was to marry," he observed,

pausing at the window to beat a light tattoo upon the pane, "where would you like her to live? How would a nice Queen Anne cottage do, just there across the road?"

"This is no time for considering any proposition, however remote," declared the Professor, who had a scientist's distaste for the speculative. Luna, decreasing in light, approaches Saturn in the house of Mars, and no plan now initiated could come to consummation."

"If I had any plan on foot," retorted Mr. Ramsey, flippantly, "I'd like to see the zodiac that could stop it." And presently he drove away, still beaming, with his pick-handles to the cranberry bog.

"Father," said Myra, when the family were alone, "is this really an unlucky day?"

"It is a day on which the most unenlightened rustic would hesitate to shear a sheep," her father replied, with authority.

"Then anything begun to-day would not be likely to come to much?"

"If your question is seriously put," said the Professor, "this is a most inauspicious time for inquiry; if it is not serious, it need not be asked at all."

"Please tell me everything you saw in Thebes, and everything you did," put in her mother; and Myra, taking a seat upon the trunk, folded her spotted veil, and thrust a hat-pin through it.

"The last thing I did," she announced, looking about her calmly—so calmly that her words seemed to lose their significance—"was to half engage myself to marry Mr. Ramsey."

"To *marry* Mr. Ramsey!" gasped her mother, sinking upon the sofa.

"Folly!" remarked her father. "It will come to nothing." But at the workshop door he lingered to hear what was to follow.

"Think of your grandfather—" began Mrs. Dale.

"I have," responded Myra, with a sigh. "His remains are probably whirling at this moment. But I am thinking more of you, mother. Are you glad or sorry?"

Mrs. Dale replied by inference only.

"My child," she said, "your grandfather was a Haydock, and what on earth was Mr. Ramsey's grandfather?"

"I don't believe he knows," her daughter ad-

mitted; "but his father was, on earth, a division superintendent, and, whatever that may be, it sounds as far above reproach as a domestic bill of lading."

"Oh, Myra," the mother sighed, "you seem to have no appreciation of the serious side of life. I wish your father would remonstrate with you."

"I shall discuss nothing," said the Professor, "while the great conjunction is impending; and, after that, if we survive, conditions will have changed materially."

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Dale, with fervour, "I wish that could be true." Her characteristic preference for unpleasant events rather than no events at all had advantages under certain circumstances.

Later, when, over tea and potted duck, Myra related to her mother all, word for word, that had passed between the agent of Pineopolis and herself, Mrs. Dale remarked:

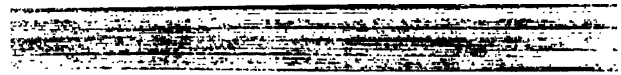
"Why, child, you are not engaged at all!"

"I'm sure I didn't mean to be," replied Myra, humbly; "but Mr. Ramsey seems to think I am."

The next day, and the next, the subject was allowed to rest. It was a family habit not to disturb

matters which did not assert themselves. The third day Mrs. Dale began a sentence with "If you should ever marry Mr. Ramsey—" and once she said: "Your father seems much more like himself." The fourth day Mr. Ramsey came again.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



CHAPTER XV

MR. RAMSEY'S whiskers had been newly trimmed, and he in other ways bore the evidences of an awakening to externals. His shoes were new, and probably his hat, also; but the red dust of the drive left this in doubt.

During the first moments of his visit Myra kept closely to her mother's side, though when it became evident that Mr. Ramsey purposed to be most discreet, she grew more venturesome. But if their meeting had been constrained, that of the agent with her parents was well-nigh stiff.

As usual, the four were gathered in the living-room, where there was a fire, though the open door let in a sweet south wind.

"Has anything of magnitude occurred in Thebes?" inquired the Professor.

"Why, yes," replied the agent, toying with the

brim of his new hat. "There was a fire yesterday in Cohen's place."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the Professor, with difficulty concealing his satisfaction that the planets should at least have made a beginning. "Anything else?"

"They did say that the Shinns are going to fail."

The Professor smiled a trifle grimly, and smacked his lips.

"The rascals!" he commented.

"And then there was a tramp killed on the railway."

The Professor bent his head three times in mute approval.

"And the pig-man has been indicted," went on Mr. Ramsey. "I didn't have a thing to do with it; it was some packers' association." He made the explanation hurriedly, with a furtive glance toward his lady-love, who seemed about to speak, but changed her mind. She was not quite sure what indicting might mean.

"News, indeed!" commented the Professor. "News, indeed!" and there followed a silence which

lasted for many seconds, while Mr. Ramsey rolled his hat into a cone.

"That's only a little bit of what I have to tell," he announced, at length, restoring the hat to its normal shape; and immediately his listeners grew attentive. "Well," he hesitated, looking up, then down into his hat. "Well, I might as well come out with it. The company has suspended work."

"The company?" repeated Myra.

"The Pineopolis Company?" demanded the Professor, as one who does not trust his ears.

"The Pineopolis Development and Colonisation Company?" cried Mrs. Dale, giving the climax its true tonic value.

"That's what," responded Mr. Ramsey. "It's all Colonel Blunt's doing," he continued, after a pause. "He would not come here to see the property, and the rest of them got tired putting up their money, I suppose, without knowing what was going on."

"A pitiful scoundrel!" proclaimed the Professor. "A brainless knave!—a double-faced, idle hound!"

"A person without a sense of decency!" added Mrs. Dale.

"An infamous nonentity!" her husband continued.

"Well, business is business, after all," put in the agent, driven by superlatives into defence of his late employer. "He won't disturb you people before spring, at any rate."

"Pray do not be concerned about us," retorted the Professor, largely. "We should in no case have remained much longer."

"Indeed, we have been thinking of a change," remarked Mrs. Dale, with pride, forgetting that the suggestion came from the planets. "I suppose you have not yet settled what you will do?"

"I am a little bit at sea," Mr. Ramsey admitted, though his face did not betray that he found the experience disturbing. "But I was never one to lie down and kick. I'm not like Oliver Cromwell, when he said he wished he had served his God as he had served his king. I did the best I could for the company, and I'm ready to do the same for someone else. I've had my eyes open, and I'm going up to New York by the evening train to see about a plan that may turn out all right."

"I should advise deferring action till after the

conjunction of the Malefics," observed Professor Dale.

"Hang the Malefics!" muttered Mr. Ramsey. "Excuse me, Professor; but if a fellow had to put off hustling till the Great Bear got his nose into the Dipper, he'd come pretty near to getting left."

"Under the circumstances," said the Professor, "your point of view is perhaps excusable."

The visit ended shortly after this, for there were things to be seen to at the bog—men to be paid off, and tools to be secured—all the dispiriting preliminary details of winding up. Already the pines seemed laughing at the company, with the old contempt of long-lived trees for short-lived men. "You shall see how long your works shall last," they sang. "We don't need capital to help us grow."

Mr. Ramsey, as he bade Myra good-bye at the door, gave her hand a possessive squeeze.

"Come out a little way," he whispered, confidently. "I have a lot to tell you."

"Had you not better wait till you come back from New York?" she asked, following to the wood-pile, where the waiting buggy stood. "There will—there will be so much more time then."

"I thought you might be interested to know what my plans are," he responded, in evident disappointment. "Besides, I cut it rather mild about the house."

"How do you mean 'cut it mild'?" she asked. They were beyond ear-shot of the others now.

"Oh, when I said there was no hurry, you know. The colonel really wants the place shut up as soon as possible."

"There is no reason why it shouldn't be shut up," she answered. "We are quite ready to go, as my father said."

"Go where?" inquired Mr. Ramsey.

"That we have not decided yet," she replied, coldly, finding the agent's manner a shade less deferential than usual.

"Oh, come," said Mr. Ramsey, "you ought not to pretend like that to me. I know how you people feel, being thrown out just as winter's coming on. That's one of the things I want to speak about."

"It is very kind of you to think of our necessities," she said.

"Of course," he went on, "I should not bring them up unless I had something to suggest."

"That's very kind," she said again.

"Myra," said Mr. Ramsey, standing still, "don't talk of kindness between you and me. You know that all I've got is yours; and now I've something to offer you that's worth while."

"Have you?" she asked, her pride and courage going from her. One by one the factors had been eliminated, and the family problem seemed now reduced to one small, miserable A plus X—A being herself, and X what Mr. Ramsey had to offer.

"In the first place," expounded Mr. Ramsey, in the terms of X, "I have got a position."

"Indeed!" said Myra, weakly.

"Do you remember Mr. Christensen?"

"Yes," more weakly still. Why should it be always Mr. Christensen? Mr. Ramsey explained.

"You see we—he and I—took something of a shine to each other that time he was here. He's much more of a gentleman than you ever gave him credit for being. So when I heard the company was likely to go under, I wrote at once to ask if he did not want a man in his colony in Tennessee; and back he writes next mail, offering me the position of superintendent at three thousand and a house, provided I could start at once. How is that?"

If Myra could have formed an opinion in the time allowed, Mr. Ramsey gave her no chance to express it.

"It's simply grand!" he went on, answering himself, and taking her satisfaction for granted. "It's out of sight! I am going to New York to close the deal; then I'll come back here—unless they want me to go right out and get things started."

"Oh, yes; it would be much better to do that," she found strength to say.

"Maybe you're right," he admitted. "Maybe it would be best for me to get an idea of the ground. And"—Mr. Ramsey hesitated and turned red—"there's one thing more: I hope you'll take it as it's meant."

"What is it?" Myra asked. There could not be much more that signified.

"It's this," said Mr. Ramsey, lowering his voice with most unneeded caution: "You and I are going to take a step up in the world. It will be easy for us, because we are young; but old people are sometimes slow about catching new ideas."

"Do you mean my father and mother," she inquired.

"Yes. There is no one I think more of than both of them; but other folks—like Mr. Christensen and his friends, when they come out to see the colony—might think them just a little—well, unusual."

"You mean that you would be ashamed of them," suggested Myra.

"Ashamed? Not I!" protested Mr. Ramsey. "But don't you think that just at first—" Here he broke off suddenly, to add, "Of course, we would see they had everything they could want, wherever they were, and—" but Mr. Ramsey's promises remained unfinished, for Myra had turned away, and was walking slowly toward the cross-roads house.

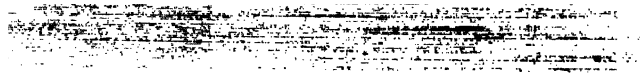
"I hope I haven't said anything to hurt your feelings?" he cried, hurrying to overtake her.

"That would be quite impossible," she answered, without looking at him.

"Well, all right!" he said, relieved. "Think over what I've said."

It was the last time that Mr. Ramsey's buggy-wheel should graze the sun-dial stump, and it was the first time he had ever driven away from Pineopolis unwatched.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



CHAPTER XVI

IT was Christmas by the calendar, though Easter by the mild south wind. The world beyond the pineland was merry with a song, and fragrant with the smell of hay—the song of three poor men in a field, and the hay of a manger. In the world was laughter, good deeds, and good desires—holly on the locomotive head-light, and mistletoe in the bridle of the baker's horse. But at Pineopolis the day would have passed unmarked in any case, for Mrs. Dale invoked the spirit of Christmas in August, when she wrote her Yuletide tale for the *Inglenook*, and the Professor had long suspected error in the Gregorian epact.

Mr. Ramsey had not returned, and the time of uncertainty seemed much longer than a week. To Myra the forest was no longer a sustaining and sympathetic presence, but a dumb entity, hopeless with eternal patience, stupid with perpetual acqui-

escence. She could have wished that a wind would rise and tear it from its roots, that fire would burn it, that anything would happen to disturb its overpowering calm. On the contrary, her mother had never seemed more fully occupied or better pleased. She sorted over drawers, and did things up in little packages; she destroyed old manuscripts, and put the newer ones in order. With no idea of when or how the change was to come, she restlessly made ready for it, and all the while her black eyes snapped with a gipsy's welcome for the untried.

"Why don't you wear your other shoes?" she said to Myra, "and keep the best to travel in?"

"Travel?" repeated Myra. "Where are we going to travel to?"

"I know no more than you do," her mother replied, as she stowed the superfluous teaspoons in a sponge-bag. "Your father tells me nothing."

"I don't believe that father has anything to tell," said Myra.

"Oh, yes, he has," her mother contradicted. "He has something on his mind, and, unless I'm very much mistaken, it's the bottle-stopper. Dear me! I wish the malefics had chosen some other time for their conjunction."

"Then let us get him to take a walk. You know he often forgets the planets when there is really anything else to talk about," Myra reminded her; and a little later the plan was carried out.

The three sauntered aimlessly, for all ways were one now. Soon the mineral spring and the prehistoric animal and the charcoal-pit would be vague as the Astoria coal-yard in the family's carboniferous period. The Professor, as he walked between his wife and daughter, pronounced a valedictory on the pines. When he waxed eloquent and impressive, Myra dropped back a pace to wipe her eyes; but Mrs. Dale, who hated retrospect, suggested Colonel Blunt as a living issue.

"That narrow-minded numskull," observed the Professor, "might have caused great inconvenience to people who had not our resources. Fortunately, however, the world is not yet bereft of men of enterprise."

"Indeed, I have thought that often," ventured Mrs. Dale, with delicacy, for her line was slender, and at any moment the Professor's thoughts might take a plunge.

"Strenuous men," continued the Professor—"men of action."

"People who can appreciate things," supplemented Myra, boldly.

"Precisely," said her father. "The International Promotion and Exploitation Concern, for example."

"Of course," breathed Mrs. Dale, in spite of Myra's cautioning glance.

"Their honesty," continued the Professor, "is a novelty that should be patentable, for without their agency this Western brewery might never have heard of my device for stopping beer-bottles."

"Brewery?" gasped Mrs. Dale. "Beer-bottles?"

"Of course," Myra assented, hurriedly, while her mother felt a warning pine-cone strike her shoulder from behind. But the Professor had forgotten the malefics.

"The terms are very satisfactory," he declared.

"I always thought the 'Myra' stopper a wonderful invention," ventured his daughter; "and, besides, it can be used just as well for sarsaparilla bottles."

"Quite so," replied her father, looking down upon her with approval. "It is one of the small

devices which often lead to great fortunes, as that wily Swede was very quick to perceive."

"What wily Swede?" demanded Mrs. Dale.

"That Christensen," replied her husband. "A knave—a plotting knave! I saw through his interest in the model at a glance, though he declared it the best of my inventions. I knew far better than to trust him with it."

"Mr. Christensen!" cried Myra, in astonishment. "Father, did Mr. Christensen really want to buy the bottle-stopper?"

The Professor smiled.

"Not *buy*," he said. "Our gentleman was much too wily for that. His stately foreign phrases contained no hint of payment. He asked me to *intrust* him with it, and offered the most preposterous references—bankers and ministers—while studiously avoiding any mention of a bonus on the option."

"The wretch!" ejaculated Mrs. Dale.

"His letters were most disingenuous," went on her husband—"filled with ridiculous protestations."

"About the bottle-stopper?" Myra asked.

"About nothing else, my child. He begged for

an interview—which I shall not grant—that he might see it once again."

"The bottle-stopper, father?"

"Yes, my child; the 'Myra.' Or, as he put it, in his crafty, foreign way—my dearest treasure."

The Professor wore his girdled purple dressing-gown, and carried in his hand a sort of Alpine-stock he sometimes used in walking. Upon his head there was a garden-hat, obsolete in form and neuter in gender. Mrs. Dale wore Myra's sun-bonnet and a most coquettish apron, largely frills, and she had looped her skirt as Amaryllis might.

"Your dearest treasure," she repeated. "How perfectly absurd."

Myra stood still; looked from one parent to the other, then turned and fled straight into the forest. On she ran as swiftly as her feet could carry her, not knowing whither, nor caring—knowing and caring only that, of all insanities she might commit, this flight would be the least impossible to explain. When her breath grew short, she went on at a walk, and, when she could walk no farther, sat down under a tree. The pines were singing once again—the forest was once more alive with friendly ghosts. These would remember when she was gone—would

remember her and laugh while weaving other dreams for other happy people. The forest had been true to her after all; it had not lied. Myra bent down and touched the sweet red needles with her lips.

By-and-by she got up and looked about her for landmarks. She knew that the shadows lay from the southward, and, by following them, she must cross some familiar trail before long. Presently she did come upon a trail—the path between the pig-man's shanty and the pit—worn glossy by the bare brown feet of Sis and Aleck.

Of her neighbours she had heard nothing since the indictment, and imagined that the children had been forbidden to come near her. In truth, in the anxieties of the time, she had given them so little thought that the sight of their old path brought her a touch of very keen reproach. Now it occurred to her that they, at least, would be glad to know of the company's failure. Perhaps they would be left undisturbed by reason of it. At all events, they should be told. And Myra, filled with the elation of a purpose, set out upon her errand.

But when she stood before the dwelling of the pig-man she felt its emptiness instinctively. A

window rattled dismally; a door made futile effort to unlatch, and, from the threshold, she was not surprised to witness the disordered evidences of flight. They were gone, leaving their only shelter for the kinder forest, where they were doubtless now in hiding, with their pigs. Like Cain and his people, they had been driven out into the wilderness; and this was Christmas-Day.

Myra hurried from the place, for it was ill-odourous and foul. But the nearest way home led past the charcoal-pit, and she chose another trail. By pushing forward she would strike the Ocean Road, and from that, a half-mile to the west, her mother's favourite path led back to Pineopolis. Perhaps—for it was Thursday—she might meet the fishman, Mr. Murray, and be driven home.

The track, worn by the pig-man's waggon going in and out, was unmistakable, and in ten brisk, breathless minutes the white sand of the Ocean Road shone through the trees ahead. At sight of it Myra pressed on more quickly, and as she did so the sound of singing came to her ears. A tuneless song it was, and wordless, to all intents, but one that Murray always sang, unless he knew many very much the same.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHAPTER XVII

"MR. MURRAY!" called Myra, beginning to run. "Wait for me, Mr. Murray, please!"

"Gosh!" exclaimed Mr. Murray, starting back as Myra sprang before him from the forest. "What's coming next?"

"Nothing that I know of," she answered, laughing. "I hope I didn't frighten you!"

"Take a heap of frightening to get me scared," he assured her, grinning, as he wiped a hot forehead with his thumb. "But I did think I'd had start enough for one day. Wait till you see what I've got in the waggon."

Murray, the fishman, was active as well as merciful, and a more rapid walker than his large and angular team. As he waited with Myra for the leisurely coming-up of the white-topped waggon, he remarked:

"This here beats anything I ever see."

"Where did they catch it?" inquired Myra, vaguely remembering a devil-fish of some weeks before.

"Nobody cotched it," he replied, mysteriously. "I found it laying beside the road."

"Then it is not a fish?"

"No," said Murray, "it is not a fish."

It was Sis—or the body of Sis—that lay rolled in a horse-blanket on the seat of Murray's waggon, and Myra, when she saw it, sprang upon the step with a cry of consternation.

"Why, it's my little friend!" she said. "Is she unconscious? Is she seriously hurt?"

"She's unconscious all right!" the fishman answered; adding, reassuringly, "But it ain't a faint that's liable to be lasting. Just smell her breath."

To Myra's great relief, the child was sound asleep and breathing heavily. Bending over her, she made a pillow for the little head, matted with moss and needles, murmuring, as she arranged the blanket, the inconsequently tender things that women say to children. To her the touch of the cold, dirty little hand brought with it a benediction from the

manger, a glimmer of the light that shone on Mary, a tremor of the joy that had been Eve's.

"We must take her to our house at once," she said to Murray. "I'm afraid she is very ill."

"It's what I call a pretty fair jag," the fishman admitted.

"A what?" indignantly.

"A 'load,'" he explained. "Somebody has been filling the child up with whiskey, and laid her alongside the road on puppose to be found. That's the way I make it out."

"Oh, do you think that possible?"

"I guess folks wouldn't kick so much against their luck if they knew all that's going on about them," he answered, philosophically.

As they went on slowly along the sandy track he told her how he had found the child wrapped in a tattered shawl beside the road, and they compared experiences of the pine-people.

"They're a low-down lot," he concluded, "and there ain't no trusting any of them."

Myra changed the subject by asking him if he knew what day it was.

"I ain't likely to forget Thursday," he chuckled.

"But this is more than Thursday—this is Christmas-Day."

"Likely enough," Murray agreed, amiably. "I ain't much on religion, but I respect it in others—especially when they live up to their principles."

"I should think you would enjoy reading the Bible," suggested Myra—"so many of the Apostles were fishermen."

"That's right," he admitted. "But preachers are a heap more stuck up now than when Peter peddled fish."

"I know that he caught them," said Myra, "but I never thought what he did with them."

"Didn't, hey? Well, you don't suppose he canned them or sent them up to Babylon in cold-storage? He hawked them, that's what he did, same as I do. I worked that out myself." Murray, with pride in his own reasoning and faith in his deductions, added further information not commonly known.

"By-and-by," he said, "when he got to be Pope, he made a law that folks must eat fish once a week—not to help the business, you understand, for he was out of it then, but because he knew it was healthy for them."

"You must have given the matter a great deal of thought," Myra remarked, with deference.

"That's right. A feller does a lot of thinking jogging through the pines, and, after a while, he's liable to get things pretty near straight. Folks all well, I hope? I declare, I forgot to ask."

"Yes, thank you; very well, indeed. See, there is mother at the door."

"Peart woman for her age, your mother," observed Murray, approvingly; but it was a form of speech he used, and implied no knowledge of the family Bible.

Mrs. Dale welcomed the advent of the little patient as a boon from heaven. But, at sight of the flushed, small face, her tears flowed freely; and when later the child's eyes opened in the warm bed, she said a little prayer of thanksgiving.

Sis looked about her for a moment in bewilderment; then, child-like, taking miracles for granted, she smiled and said, "Hello, Myradale! Are you here, too?"

"Yes, Sis; I'm here."

"Say, did he get away?"

"Who, dear?"

"Why, Aleck. Don't you know? Dad sent him off to build a fire, so that the cops would think it was we."

"And what did you do, Sis?" asked Myra.

"I dunno. I guess I must have died then."

"But, child, you did not die."

"If I didn't," demanded Sis, "how was it I came to fly?"

Below stairs Mr. Murray, in conversation with the Professor, had chanced to mention the war impending between the Russians and the Portuguese; also an earthquake which had recently occurred in the island of Ceylon. He had likewise remarked that the farms hereabouts were suffering from drouth.

"Myra!" called the Professor from the stair-foot, "tell your mother I shall drive to town with Murray."

"Indeed you must not!" cried Mrs. Dale, descending hurriedly. When, after a quarter of an hour, she returned, Myra was feeding Sis from a spoon, and the child was enjoying the unusual experience thoroughly, though her appetite was not robust.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Dear me!" sighed Mrs. Dale, as, wiping her eyes, she sank down upon the foot of the bed. "I wish there had never been a planet made."

"Does father really mean to go?"

"Mean to!" exclaimed Mrs. Dale, in calm derision. "He has gone."

"What reason did he give?"

"Don't ask me!" said Mrs. Dale, still chafing from the slight to her advice. "All the afternoon he has been as restless as a peacock before a shower. He said there had been an error of two weeks in his predictions, and that he should have to telegraph to Washington about them. I suppose, when he saw Murray's waggon, he could not resist going to town."

"He can't come back before to-morrow," Myra reflected; "but there is really no reason why we should mind being alone."

"None in the world," her mother admitted, resignedly; "and it may do him some good to talk to people. Murray, at least, is absolutely sane."

Later, when, after profound sleep, Sis sat an unwilling invalid in the kitchen rocker, Mrs. Dale created a plum-pudding, which gave much promise of success, and Myra, with her sleeves rolled to the

elbow, helped. The presence of the child in the house gave to the day a new significance.

"To-night we shall have a lighted tree," said Mrs. Dale, "and Sis will think it very pretty."

"What's to keep the darned thing from burning up?" inquired Sis.

"You must not use such words; they are not lady-like," admonished Mrs. Dale. Presently, pausing in her work, she said:

"Dear me! how dark it has grown, Myra. Can it be getting late?"

"Why no; it must be scarcely three o'clock," replied her daughter; "but perhaps it is going to rain."

"It seems to me more like an eclipse."

Mrs. Dale spoke seriously, and, laying down her spoon, turned from the table. Myra laughed.

"That is impossible," she said; "but certainly we shall have a storm. I hope father has got safe to Thebes."

"I'm glad I made him take his comforter; it may turn cold," said Mrs. Dale, adding: "Listen! I thought I heard a step outside."

"Perhaps father has come back," said Myra,

jumping up, as the sound of hurried steps upon the chips grew unmistakable. But before she could reach the door it was thrown open so violently that the lean-to trembled. The pig-woman stood upon the threshold, grimy and dishevelled. Her black hair, with its streak of white, hung loose; her skin was red and wet with perspiration from the forehead to the throat and breast, from which both hands clutched back her ragged dress for air.

"Get out of this!" she gasped, "for the love of God."

"What's the matter? What has happened?"

"Don't stop to talk!" the woman almost shrieked. "The pines are burning!"

"Merciful heaven! Where can we go?"

"Go where you please!" she cried, roughly. "Only don't stop to monkey—and take the kid along! She's yours. I give her to you, and maybe God Almighty'll let us down easy."

They stood together at the cross-roads now, all four together—comrades for the moment of common peril. The world about them seemed seen through a veil of brown gauze. Across the face of the sun strange shadows moved, and from the south a cloud

rose above the trees that was the shape of an arm holding an uplifted hammer. The air was very still; the four long vistas of the roads stretched out as so many paths to safety, and Myra, as she looked to left and right, believed the danger to have been exaggerated. Then, suddenly, across the road to Thebes, a great black mass appeared to roll from side to side, shutting out the distance, as though the way had ended there in the mouth of a tunnel. Then, as a cannon in the night, a red streak flashed through the blackness, which presently was turned to crimson, warming and brightening as a coal before the bellows, changing in an instant from cloud to flame, fierce and terrible as a new sun rising in the west.

"This ain't no place for me!" the pig-woman laughed, with a horrible travesty of mirth. "I'm off!"

"Whatever comes, we must keep together!" cried Myra, clutching at her arm; but the woman laughed again.

"Not much, we won't! He'd kill me if he knew I'd told. He set the woods afire to burn you out. And I can run, I can. You couldn't any of you keep up with me."

In an instant she was gone, running like a rabbit through the trees, her torn skirt fluttering behind. But before the forest closed about her, she turned and called back, fiercely:

"Don't stand there gaping! Get to the charcoal-pit, you fools!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CHAPTER XVIII

"SHE was right," Myra cried, hurriedly. "Mother, we must make a rush for the pit."

"No, no!" protested Mrs. Dale, alert and determined, "the sky in that direction is darker than in any other. It would be like that wicked woman to mislead us."

"She came to warn us," urged Myra, "and it may be our only chance. Sis, wrap your dress about your head and start at once. Don't look back or stop an instant. Run on through anything, and remember, I tell you it is safe."

"Yes, Myradale," sobbed Sis, and ran.

Almost mechanically Myra pulled off her apron, and dropped it on the ground.

"The child is going directly toward the fire!" her mother cried; and Myra answered, firmly:

"So are we."

"Dear me!" gasped Mrs. Dale. "I suppose we shall have to now."

Then, swiftly and without a farewell glance, they left the cross-roads, following the child into the forest.

Myra was conscious of her own calmness as she ran, and of her mother's pluck she had never entertained a doubt. In truth, necessity for action had come too fast upon the heels of danger to admit of fear, and death is only fearful when he lies in wait—else why should so many cowards face him bravely? Each knew that the chosen path to safety must lead across the track of the advancing flames, and that the issue of their race might hang upon a rising wind. But, knowing this, they turned set faces to the south, and hurried on.

Under the trees the sinister twilight that had fallen deepened, and at times their eyes, made misty by resinous fumes, could scarcely see the trail. The air was moved by gentle currents, hot and cold by turns, which swayed the branches noiselessly; but in the distance rose a murmur new to the pines, and terrible. This sound was like the rumble of a train a great way off, but growing every moment nearer,

louder, more distinct. As yet they could see nothing of the fire, and over-head dense foliage shut out the sky; but shreds of vapour, blue and brown, wove webs across the path, and soft white flakes fell rattling on the needles like snow in April, when the air is warm. There was a rustle along the ground and the patter of the many little feet of frightened creatures—pine-mice from the hollow trees, squirrels from the acorn groves, and rabbits from the laurel covers—moving northward.

"Dear me!" panted Mrs. Dale, "I wish we had thought of following the animals. They always know exactly what to do by instinct."

Myra grasped her mother's arm, fearing, perhaps, that the temptation to put a fact of natural history to the test would prove too strong.

"Come, dear!" she encouraged her; "we have not very far to go—I see the clearing just ahead."

"Then why on earth doesn't that rabbit go there?" demanded Mrs. Dale, fanning herself ineffectually with her handkerchief. To have come so far without a mishap was, in itself, an argument against having come at all.

"We did not even close the door," she went on,

prodigal of breath. "That woman was so tragic with her 'Fly for your lives!'"

"But it was noble of her to warn us."

"Noble!" sniffed Mrs. Dale. "I have no doubt she is at this moment rummaging in all our things; and, if we were to go back——"

"How can you speak of turning back?" Myra lost her patience. "Come! we must go faster."

"Of course, it is always best to be safe," Mrs. Dale assented; and then she cried, in a voice of real alarm:

"Dear me! Look at that!"

A faint red glow shone between the trees, where brighter flashes came and went, and in a moment all the trunks grew ruddy as those about a hunter's camp. The air, sucked inward by the advancing fire, clamourous for oxygen, swept sand and needles in a sudden cloud of whirling dust, and, as it passed, the pines sent up a roar of defiance. Then light was everywhere—a merry light that danced and leapt and brightened and grew till the wood was filled with capering shadows and every trunk became a column of cornelian and every twig a coral spray. The air was thick with tinsel threads, the

ground ankle-deep in sparkling crystals. Light, light, more light—the light of a million Christmas hearths, the light of a burning world, the light of a sun gone mad.

For a moment the two women stood transfixed. For a moment fear and hope alike forsook them, and the sense of life and death. It was as though the judgment-day had come—as though the burden of doing had been lifted from them. Insensibly they clung together like children, hand in hand before Omnipotence. Had the end come then they would have met it, hand in hand; but, in front, a miracle had come to pass. With the sound of many waters, of beating sails and timbers ground on granite rocks—for destruction sings a single gamut at her work—the forest fell about them, the flames swept round them, beside them, over them. For a moment, for the time the lips might take to say "Our Father," some strong, inrushing draught held back the fire, leaving a clear path to where, not twenty yards away, the pineland child stood waving her thin arm.

"Come this way, Myradale! Come quick!" To the east of the clearing the forest stood intact,

and the same accident of wind had so far kept still another peril at bay. The black, impenetrable clouds of smoke that shut out everything a hundred yards away toward Thebes swept around the charcoal-pit instead of crossing it.

It was difficult to grasp the changes that a breath had brought about among familiar things. It seemed that, from the lean-to where their Christmas pudding waited for the oven, they had been wafted without warning to another planet—perhaps one of those of which the Professor spoke so knowingly, where the atmosphere is charged with ruddy vapours, and the sunlight faint. In the odd, brown light the hut, the remnant of the pines and tangled laurel-growth were like nothing they had ever known. It was as though a spell had fallen on them, which spell was broken presently by Mrs. Dale.

"Good gracious, Myra," she exclaimed, "if that child has not brought the cat!"

"You didn't want to leave him, did you, ma'am?" demanded Sis, in wonder, whereat the others laughed hysterically.

"Myra," said Mrs. Dale a moment later, "I

suppose we have had what might be called a narrow escape."

"Yes," assented Myra; "the expression would not be a bit too strong."

"And isn't it strange," reflected Mrs. Dale, "how little one really notices at such times that might be useful afterward?"

"Speaking of local colouring," Myra said, "what should you call mine at present?"

"Red," said Mrs. Dale—"bright red, with streaks of black."

When the reaction from the strong excitement came they sat upon the sand, their backs against the log walls of the hut, like people upon a life-raft, who, having tasted danger, are proof against discomfort. Presently the child fell sound asleep, her head upon the lap of Mrs. Dale, and the black cat climbed to Myra's shoulder. As she felt the familiar prick of his claws and the touch of fur against her ear, she whispered, penitently:

"I don't deserve your esteem, Uranus; I forgot all about you."

"I suppose," speculated Mrs. Dale, as her interest in the situation grew, "that by this time everyone for miles around is greatly excited."

"I have been thinking how very much worried father will be," said Myra.

"Indeed he will," her mother agreed; "but it's a great deal better for him to be worried in the Union House at Thebes than to be sitting here on the charcoal without a hat. Besides, he's certain to take a hopeful view. You know he never will admit that either of us is ever seriously ill."

"But we never are."

"That is no reason why he should ignore the possibility. I hope this will be a lesson to him that we are not made of—of——"

"Asbestos," suggested Myra.

"Of course there will be relief parties," her mother continued, giving rein to her imagination. "All sorts of persons with axes and things will come to save us, and, dear me! it would be just like Mr. Ramsey to return and be the first to rescue you."

"He could scarcely do less, in common humanity, if he were here."

"Yes; but, after all, it may be someone else."

"Probably Murray, the fishman," Myra suggested, laughing, and her mother went on:

"I should not be surprised if it got in all the papers—just a little item, you know; 'Perished in the Pines,' or something like that."

"Or 'Sad Fate of a Talented Writer and her Beautiful Daughter—The Thriving Village of Pineopolis in Ashes."

"Wasn't it fortunate your father had our things insured?"

"You did not think so at the time, mother."

"I only said it was a foolish waste of money; and I'm sure it did seem so."

"Isn't it interesting to reflect," suggested Myra, "that we have not a single personal belonging in the world—not even a shoe-button to replace those I dropped on the way here."

"Yes," Mrs. Dale sighed, with satisfaction. "For once in our lives we shall have everything new, and some company, in a fifteen-story building, will have to pay the bills."

"I am afraid father will regret his books," said Myra, thoughtfully.

"That," exclaimed her mother, "is the very best thing that has happened. I can't mind losing 'Spirits in Prison,' or anything else, when I think of all those horoscopes burning up."

As they talked the sun sank lower, and became a red spot in the bank of smoke; and presently Sis, awakening, asked for water.

"Dear me," commented Sis's former pillow, "I never knew a child who did not want a drink. Now I've been thirsty for an hour, but I knew it was no use to mention the fact."

"But, mother, there is plenty of water here," cried Myra, springing to her feet; "and, by-the-bye, wouldn't you like a cracker?"

"A cracker, child? You're crazy."

"Oh, no, I'm not. We keep crackers in the hut, and jam, don't we, Sis?"

From the cabin she brought out the box of biscuits intended for the children's refreshment, and from the spring fetched water in a strange receptacle.

"Where in the world did you find that bottle?" asked Mrs. Dale.

"I disinterred it, mother. It is a thing of great historic interest."

When the stars came out it grew so chilly that Mrs. Dale, as ever keen for new experiences, consented to retire to the hut, wherein Aleck had long

ago made the charcoal burners' bunk comfortable with pine-boughs.

"There is only room for the child and one of us," she declared, as though the fact were gratifying. "You and I will have to divide the night into watches."

"Very well, mother; I will take the first, and call you when your turn comes."

"That ought to be at one o'clock. But you will have to count a million to know what time it is."

"Oh, no; I shall take observations on the constellation Gemini. At midnight that should be right above our heads, with Virgo rising."

"I wish you would not talk about such things," protested Mrs. Dale; "it makes me nervous."

As the night fell, Myra, alone upon the low sill of the burners' hut, looked out across the darkness, dotted as with the bivouac fires of a sleeping army. To the north the sky was crimson, as she had seen it at Astoria when the oil-tanks burnt at Hunter's Point, and she knew that the fire must have spread as far as Morgantown, where the man lived who cultivated colts. She wondered if it would occur to anyone, seeing her now, to steal a colt to visit

her. And, examining her scorched skirt in the firelight, she speculated as to what would happen if anything were wrong with the insurance. There generally was something wrong when circumstances brought the Dales in conflict with the market-place, and, at such times, the market-place invariably came out ahead. She remembered a family in Astoria whose house had burnt, and the neighbours had presented them with a purse of twenty-seven dollars, on condition that they moved away. The Professor had contributed an umbrella, and Mrs. Dale a cake. Their name was Blodgett, and the father stammered. These details were not important, but Myra could not help recalling them. Gradually it seemed to her that Mr. Blodgett had a great many pigs and Mrs. Blodgett a great many black cats, and that her mother insisted upon giving a party, with no other provision for supper than a tin-box of crackers, which want of forethought she found herself confiding to a person who said "So!" most sympathetically.

When Myra raised her head again the constellation Gemini had passed mid-heaven, and a figure stood before her, which, for a moment, she believed

some phantom from her late relapse into unconsciousness.

"Why, Aleck!" she exclaimed, below her breath, not to arouse the sleepers. "Where did you come from?"

"Where's Sis?" the boy demanded sharply in return.

"Oh, she's asleep inside. Don't speak so loud."

"Honest?"

"Yes. I wouldn't tell you a story. Where is mam?"

"Gone."

"Gone where?"

"I dunno. Dad hit her, and she hit him back—hit him good, and then she run. He couldn't foller, because the herd was gone clean mad."

"Mad?"

"Yes; they smelt the smoke, and went clean mad. I tried to get to where you lived, but the durn fire druv me off. I had to dodge round hell-of-a-ways to get here. Say, Myradale, do you know anyone that wants to hire a boy?"

"Come away from the door, and we will talk the matter over," said Myra, laughing as she rose. "I suppose you are the boy."

"Yes; it's me," admitted Aleck. "I ain't got no place to go, and I ain't got nobody to go to."

"I was just thinking," went on Myra, untruthfully, as they walked up and down briskly in the starlight, "that all we needed was a boy."

"Honest?" demanded Aleck.

"The difficulty is that we can't pay him anything. Our house is burned, with everything we had in the world, and we haven't the slightest idea where we are to get anything to eat."

"All right, I'll come," said Aleck, promptly. "I won't never go away as long as I live. What'll I do fust?"

"Go quietly to the corner of the cabin, and you will find a box of crackers."

"Yes'm. What'll I do then?"

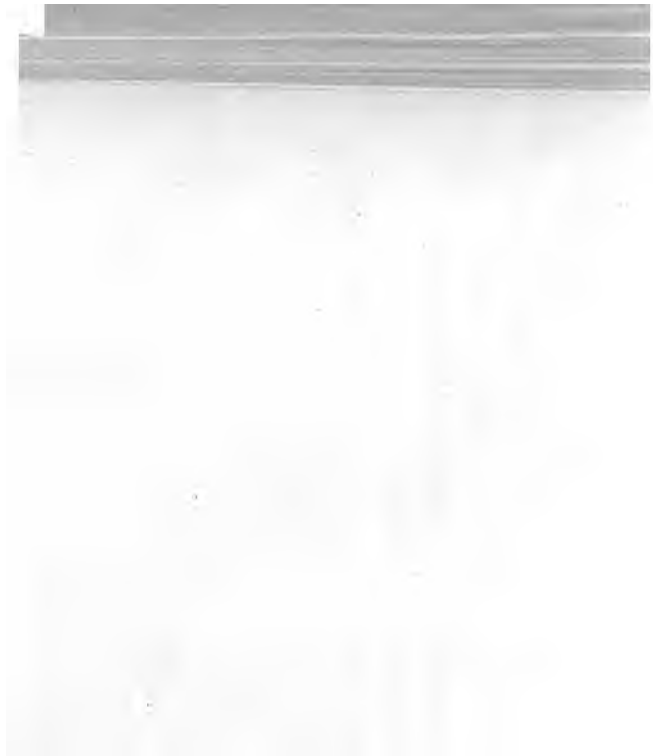
"Sit down and eat them—as many as you can."

Standing by the pool, Myra gazed down for a time into the quiet water, where three stars lay reflected. She had often wondered how the place would look by starlight. Soon she should never see it again by any light; and yet it seemed as though everything that had ever happened to her had come to pass beside the pool. Here Aleck and Sis had

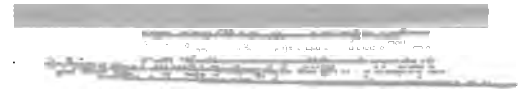
started from the bushes; here the beautiful brown colt had dipped his velvet nose, and here, as nowhere else, the pines had brought her messages and fairy-tales and a foolish song:

> "To you and me when tempests be,
> To both together in every weather."

Kneeling among the rushes she dipped some water in her palm and raised it to her lips, then stirred the pool's smooth surface till the stars began to dance. And while she was thus foolishly employed a voice spoke at her ear.



CHAPTER NINETEEN



CHAPTER XIX

"MYRADALE," whispered Aleck, "get back out of this! They're coming!"

"Who is coming?"

"Them—and dad."

As she stood up to listen his grip upon her arm did not relax.

"Come out of this," he said again. "Don't you hear them?"

Whatever sound his keener ear had caught was not yet discernible to hers; but presently she heard it also. It was like laughter, shrill and guttural; like inarticulate blasphemies, like the cry of demon huntsmen calling in the night, like nothing she had ever heard before; and it was coming nearer—dad and *them*.

Myra put a hand upon the lad's thin shoulder.

"Don't be afraid," she said, feeling ridiculously brave, for in some way the knoll seemed to her en-

chanted ground. "Nothing can hurt us here—nothing!"

And then, as though in answer to an invocation, the fire, which had been creeping stealthily across the clearing through the dry oak-leaves and withered grass, sprang up once more—sprang up and shot into the air till the whole barrier of standing pines became a fiery curtain, transparent as red glass, through which the lighted alleys beyond were visible. Myra never knew how much of the picture that she saw was real and how much a phantom of the brain, but it seemed that, as she looked, a figure stood out in the strong glare—the figure of the pig-man, black with ashes, glistening with sweat, tall among the snorting remnant of his herd. It seemed as though, confronted by the fire, the animals stood at bay; then, wheeling in their clumsy terror, ran into the forest, followed by the man, who leaped and swung his arms above his head. So quickly did the scene present itself, grow blurred, and then dissolve, that Myra would have distrusted her own senses had not Aleck clung to her, whispering, hoarsely:

"They couldn't touch you, could they, Myradale?"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

There was nothing of the pineland left to burn now, for what had been the clearing lay an oasis in the desolation. Of all the forest only the grove upon the knoll remained, and the birch-trees by the pool; and these owed much to Aleck, who, with a branch, had beaten out a score of burning trails that threatened them.

Just before dawn there was a sound of hissing everywhere and the patter of rain upon the laurel leaves.

"It's a good thing this here rain held off to let the fire burn 'em up," commented Aleck, and Myra was much too tired to remonstrate. They had crawled in close to the cabin's sheltered side, and spoke in undertones, not to arouse the sleepers.

"Won't you tell me a story, Myradale?" he begged her.

"And which one shall it be?" she asked.

"That one about the girl in the tower, and the two blokes what rode through the fire to get her."

"Oh, that was Brunhild."

"Yes, that was her; the girl with auburn hair, who waved her lily-white hand, and yelled out that she'd wed the guy who got there first."

"I never told you that she yelled," corrected Myra.

"I'll bet she had to yell," the boy protested, "if her fire was anything like ours. Maybe she didn't, very loud, when she thought it was Gunnar; but when it turned out to be the Sigurd feller—say, wouldn't you have yelled, Myradale?"

By the time a faint light filled the sky and objects twenty yards away had become distinguishable through the smoke and drifting steam, Mrs. Dale made her appearance, much refreshed.

"Where did you ever find that boy?" she asked, with much interest.

"Oh, I've adopted him," said Myra, looking up.

"Have you?" Mrs. Dale was not at all displeased. "Boys are often useful to run errands. Dear me, did you ever see anything so dismal?" And Mrs. Dale looked eagerly about to note the havoc of the night.

Where the pines had been there stretched, as far as they could see, a smouldering plain, from which rose strange, distorted shapes of half-burnt stumps and blackened skeletons of trees. For a time the watchers hoped that some chance had intervened to

spare the cross-roads house; but at last an opening drift disclosed only the black shaft of its chimney, marking the spot where it had stood.

It was not in the direction in which they had expected to see it, and the distance seemed much shorter than when measured by their steps on the evening before. The roads, too, where their outline could be traced, seemed nearer.

"I think we had better put up some sort of a signal to show we are safe," said Myra, filled with new energy at the sight of far-off white farm-houses and stacks of hay. "Or perhaps they could see us if we all stood in a row upon the roof and waved."

"I think we had better keep out of sight till we have washed our faces," said her mother.

But, not long after this, Aleck, from the roof, called out that there were men moving in the fields.

"Give me your hand," cried Myra; and, with the boy's help, she, too, mounted.

"Oh, mother," she called, "they are looking for us already! I can hardly make them out, but there must be twenty men down where the marsh juts into the pines. Give me something to wave. Quick—your red shawl!"

She caught the shawl and swung it above her head, pausing from time to time to peer eagerly toward the band of rescuers.

"Ah, they cannot see it!" she cried, almost with tears of disappointment. "If I only had something white. Mother, take off your petticoat."

"Indeed, I shall do nothing of the sort," said Mrs. Dale, with dignity.

"If you don't, I will."

"Up there before those men? Myra, you are crazy!"

A moment later she called through the cabin door:

"Here, child, hand this to that young lady on the roof."

"They seen that!" yelled Aleck, in great excitement. "They seen that, sure. Darn the smoke! It's shut 'em off again!"

The boy leaped down, to climb a birch-tree for a better view. Sis, clambering to his place, sat silently at Myra's feet. Presently she cried:

"I see somebody. He's coming through the fire like Mr. Knight in the story; and you're the lady in the tower, ain't you, Myradale?"

"Exactly like her," laughed Myra, amused at the facility of the child's fancy. "But I am sure that nobody could be coming so soon. It will be a long time before the ground is cool enough to walk on."

"But don't you see him now?" protested the child, pointing toward the cross-roads.

"It must be a burnt stump; that might look like a man."

"No, no!" cried Sis, growing more excited. "It's a man in a buggy. Look! look!" and, as Myra followed the pointing finger, the smoke for a moment lifted, and she saw beside the ruined house a buggy, with a pale brown horse.

"I wisht it had been the other one," sighed the child.

As Myra caught sight of Mr. Ramsey she called the news of his presence to her mother.

"Come out, and let him see you are here," she said.

"Indeed, I shall do nothing of the sort."

"Then how will he know you are safe?"

"He will have to guess it for the present. I think you might have selected something else——"

"You can have it now, mother; I shall not need it again."

It is ever easier to undo than to restore, and for a time Mrs. Dale, as it were, lost step with the march of events without. Meanwhile, Mr. Ramsey said many unintelligible things in pantomime, using his hat to make his gestures plain. He pointed to the simmering ashes, and shook it to and fro, as in exultation; he waved it sadly toward Pineopolis, and tossed it high above his head in exultation; he appeared to eat from it, with ill-timed relish, and never for a moment seemed to doubt that he had made his meaning clear.

"What is he doing now?" a muffled voice questioned Myra from the interior of the hut.

"He is pointing toward Thebes, and jumping up and down. I think he means that father is safe."

"I'd like to know what he is doing in Thebes, then," was the only comment from Mrs. Dale.

The signalling was now interrupted by a cry from Aleck, in the tree.

"Hooray!" he shouted. "Hooray! Hooray! Look at him come!"

"What can he mean?" cried Myra.

"Look there!" said Sis, and this time she pointed to the Ocean Road.

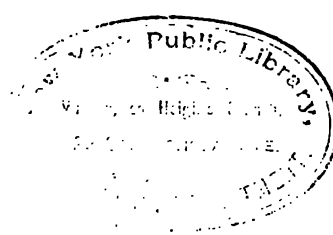
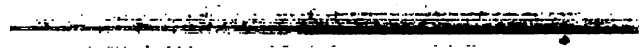
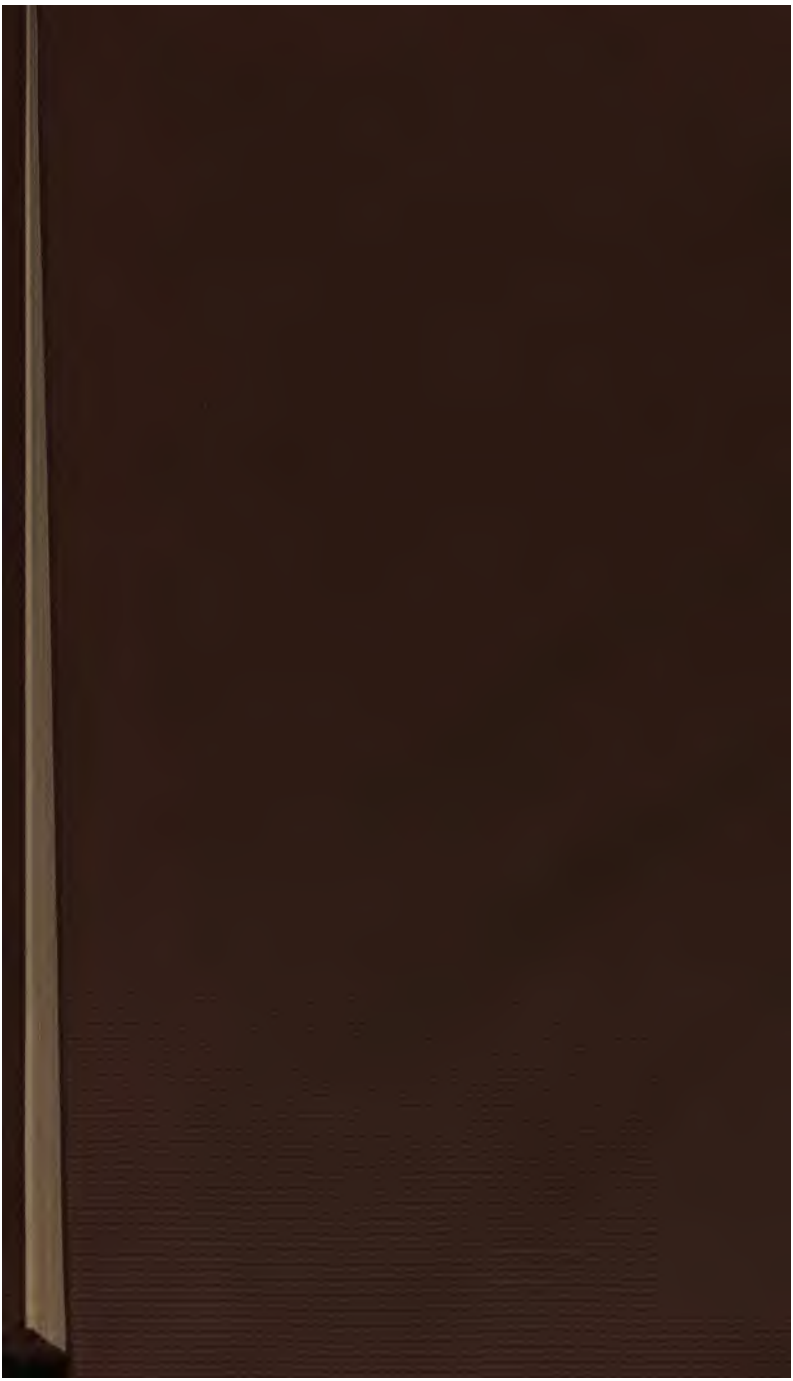
It was not strange to her that a horseman should come riding to the tower; neither was it strange to Myra, whose faith in the impossible was strong; and involuntarily she glanced across her shoulder to see if Mr. Ramsey, too, had started; and this was her last thought of Mr. Ramsey for many a minute.

The rider followed the track, now half obliterated, and possessed, apparently, some knowledge of the land. When the way was clear he put spurs to his horse; when the fallen logs impeded him he cleared them like hurdles, and, when frightened by scattered sparks the animal threatened to bolt, he restored reason with the curb. Sometimes the smoke would hide him altogether. Once, when a great, black, tottering pine fell close behind him, he well-nigh lost control of the plunging horse. Once they were near falling. But on they came—swerving, dodging, leaping, till, with a final bound, a splash beside the pool, a rustle in the laurel leaves, the horse cantered, free to plunge his blistered fetlocks

in the cool water, while the rider, blackened and breathless, as one who comes to victory through battle, sprang from the saddle.

Myra was on the ground to meet him, and Mrs. Dale, now clothed and in her right mind, beheld a strange sight. She saw her daughter's head upon the shoulder of one who might have been a burner of charcoal, and heard her say:

"I thought that you might come."

"So?" said the charcoal-burner, throwing away his whip, that his arms might be more free.

THE END